



(Courtesy of Steve Harmon and Steve Conard) A picture of the former Hutchinson News building at 15 E. Sherman Ave., as seen during the 1903 flood.

<http://www.hutchnews.com/Todaystop/News-turns-140>

As nation celebrates its birthday, Hutch's first paper turns 140

Many innovations, accomplishments, changes in century-plus with more to come.

By Amy Bickel - The Hutchinson News - abickel@hutchnews.com

Hutchinson wasn't even a year old when Houston Whiteside came to town, a town with a few businesses along a small Main Street and a few sprawling shanties that dotted the sand hills.

But the young Tennessee lawyer must have seen promise in the town site founded by C.C. Hutchinson.

On July 4, 1872, with the backing of Leslie Perry, he launched a newspaper, printing 5,000 copies.

Thus, as our country celebrates another birthday, so does The News. The paper that covers Hutchinson and the southwest quarter of Kansas was born in a 12-by-20-foot frame building on Main Street in Hutchinson with Whiteside as editor and publisher.

In fact, The News is one of the city's oldest businesses, if not the oldest.

Much has changed in 140 years. For instance, Hutchinson has grown from roughly 250 people in July 1872 to more than 40,000 in 2012. The News now has more than 30,000 Sunday print subscribers, along with 43,000 unique visitors viewing its website.

And, in 140 years, reporters have covered many notable events, such as the Greensburg tornado in 2007 and a legal and editorial battle on legislative reapportionment that earned The News a Pulitzer Prize in 1965.

"The Hutchinson News has a long and rich history dating to Hutchinson's earliest beginnings," said Publisher John Montgomery.

Early newspaper

The first edition of The Hutchinson News was designed to attract settlers. The four pages were filled with the town's vast possibilities.

The first issues reported the population of Reno County at about 3,500, but increasing at the rate of eight to 10 per day. It also reported that crews were constructing the two-story Reno County Courthouse, with a jail in the basement, along with a bridge across the Arkansas River. Whiteside described Hutchinson as the "Queen City of the Prairie."

The newspaper also touted itself as being "a weekly Republican Journal, devoted primarily to the interests of the people of Hutchinson, Reno County and the Great Arkansas Valley, the Garden of Kansas."

"In those days, newspapers sprang up like volunteer wheat," reported The News in its 1972 Centennial Edition. "They required no more capital than a shoeshine stand, and the boomer editors moved from town to town with one wagon holding their complete stock - a Washington hand press which could turn out 250 two-page copies an hour, ink, a shirt-tail of type, and some paper."

The News continued to survive with C.C. Hutchinson, the city's founder, seeing a bright future. He wrote a column that was published on the front page.

"There is a degree of satisfaction in writing for The News, which will only be appreciated by those who know how anxiously I have looked forward to the time when our good county of Reno and the surrounding country could support a neat lively newspaper. That time has arrived, and henceforth we shall all await with rare interest the weekly visits of our home paper."

Hutchinson wrote that the paper came more than a year after the first settler located in Reno County, nearly eight months since the first house was built in town and six months from when the governor signed the papers organizing Reno County and appointed the first officials.

In the same column, Hutchinson, a Baptist minister, also closed with a toast of pure cold Arkansas Valley water, saying the town was a temperance town and that "Liquor saloons will be absolutely prohibited."

Early subscriptions were \$2 a year, \$1 for six months. Among the first advertisers were the Reno County Bank, Thomas S. Scoreshy, contractor and builder, and Mack McAllister, a barber and hairdresser.

Several owners

Whiteside, who became the Reno County attorney in November 1872 and who also had interests in the Reno County State Bank, Hutchinson Lumber Co. and agriculture, sold the paper in 1875 to Fletcher Meredith. Meredith made it a daily in 1885.

Meredith sold The News to Ralph Easley, who went broke during "the panic of the late 1880s," according to a Harris Group publication. The News was sold from under him in 1891.

A.L. Sponsler, who pumped life back into The News, purchased it for \$1,900. He sold it to W.Y. Morgan.

At that time, The News had a circulation of 2,000. By 1920, Morgan increased readership to 12,000, expanding the coverage area into southwest Kansas. Morgan also battled a competitor, the Hutchinson Gazette.

In 1924, Morgan moved The News to a building at Second and Walnut. He then purchased the Gazette and renamed it the Herald. He published both papers with two separate staffs in the same plant - The Herald in the morning and The News at night.

His wife succeeded him after he died in 1932.

Harris family steps in

In 1907, Ralph A. Harris purchased the Ottawa Herald - the start of what would be the current Harris Enterprises.

His two sons, John and Sidney, joined him. They purchased the Chanutte Tribune in 1927, with John as editor. When Ralph died in 1930, Sidney succeeded him as editor and publisher.

In 1933, Mrs. Morgan retired as publisher of The News. She found a buyer in the longtime newspaper family.

The Harris brothers formed the Hutchinson Publishing Co. to make the purchase, with their mother, Mrs. Ralph Harris, also associated with the company, according to a 1933 News article. John Harris became editor and publisher of both papers, with The News becoming the group's flagship paper.

Circulation grew from 24,000 in 1933 to 50,000, according to a Harris publication.

The two papers were consolidated into one publication, The Hutchinson News-Herald, in 1942. Owners dropped Herald from the publication in 1957 - the same year The News moved to its current location at 300 W. Second.

Going modern

The News continued to grow and change over the years, with the help of publishers Peter Macdonald, John McCormally, Stuart Awbrey, Richard Buzbee and Wayne Lee.

Up until 1972, The News used the old hot-type lead printing, said Darrel Mangels, who worked in the pressroom for 43 years. The hot lead plates were heavy, he added, weighing 50 pounds or more.

In 1972, under Awbrey's direction, The News went from the hot-type to cold-type, or modern offset printing with a press that is still used today, Publisher Montgomery said.

Robert Nicklin, 88, a retired printer, said it was "hard on an old man in his 50s to learn a computer program," but added that the modern changes were part of progress.

The switch to a computerized system continued through the 1970s and 1980s, said Buzbee, The News' publisher from 1979 to 1992. He called it the early stages of a "big computer revolution."

Reporters no longer used typewriters, but instead typed on a keyboard connected to a monitor.

Meanwhile, Buzbee said, on July 29, 1988, The News printed its last afternoon edition and transformed into strictly a morning newspaper.

In 1996, The News launched its online edition hutchnews.com, Montgomery said.

Community involvement

Living up to its founding principles, The News has been a leader in the community and southwest Kansas.

That included several efforts under Buzbee's leadership. In 1982, he said, the national trade magazine "Advertising Age" published the results of its search for the "Nation's 10 Most Under-Rated Small City Newspapers." The News was on the list.

After a massive ice storm in December 1984, The News published an editorial urging reforestation of Hutchinson. First National Bank responded with advertising support and a committee was named to start the work, which included the purchase of thousands of small trees sold in The News' parking lot, Buzbee said. The basic structure of the tree program continues today.

In 1988, Hutchinson was named an All-American city, with the Trees for Tomorrow project and The News' campaign was a key part of the nomination.

The biggest honor, however, came in 1965, when The News received the most prestigious of the Pulitzer prizes, a Gold Medal for Meritorious Service. The News won the prize for a lawsuit that forced state officials to redraw legislative districts into areas of equal population. The suit and a vigorous editorial campaign were not popular in a circulation area where some smaller districts had obtained grossly over-balanced legislative power as urban areas grew.

"Of course, the coveted Pulitzer Prize remains a proud part of our past, and The News is one of only three newspapers in Kansas, I think, ever to have won a Pulitzer," Montgomery said. "The News has long been fiercely independent and unafraid on its editorial page."

Other memories

Buzbee recalled a "failure" of when he, as publisher and Chamber of Commerce chairman, promoted an effort to get horse racing back at the Kansas State Fair.

"We lost out in the competition, but that may have been the best failure on record. The 'winners' who beat us out in the horseracing competition went bankrupt."

Buzbee said when he retired in 1992, the staff presented him with a tin cup and some dark glasses "just in case. So far, I haven't needed them, but I keep them handy."

Meanwhile, Mangels and Bob Brooks, who retired as a printer in 1999, recalled a snow storm that dropped 16 inches causing the press crew to sleep at The News. They had the paper printed, but it stayed on the loading docks because the snow was so deep.

The News, however, has never missed a printing, and Mangels said it only printed out of the building once in his 43 years.

The retired employees, who meet for coffee at Village Inn every Tuesday, also recalled newspaper officials trading farmers subscriptions for wheat, which was dumped in the parking lot. There also were a few times perfume was put in the ink to print ads for Wagner Nursery, because nursery owners wanted their ads to smell like roses.

And, during the hot-lead years, crew members would cook hamburgers and coffee on the hot metal.

Year 141

Today, The News issued its first paper of year 141.

The News continues to cover 39 counties in the southwest quarter of Kansas, something that "goes way back ... to when The News established itself as the morning daily paper for southwest Kansas - meaning all the way to the Oklahoma and Colorado borders. And still today, long after the Wichita Eagle pulled in its boundaries, The News still delivers as far away as Elkhart," said Montgomery.

However, while coverage stays the same, The News hasn't been immune to the changing landscape affecting most longstanding print newspaper publications.

While the way readers obtain news is changing, The News continues to evolve in an industry that is reinventing itself, Montgomery said.

Buzbee said print subscribers were waning during his tenure. Circulation first dropped when the railroad quit delivering the paper, which happened years before he took over as publisher.

Gregg Beals, The News' production director, said that, for a while, employees delivered the paper to Hutchinson's bus station, which delivered papers out west.

That helped get the paper to a few western Kansas cities, he said.

Circulation was above 40,000 in the early 1990s.

"It's kind of sad," said Richard Popp, who retired as assistant publisher in 1989. "The Internet is killing newspapers."

That affects staffing. Buzbee recalled a time when he had 14 to 16 reporters on staff, which allowed reporters to develop and focus on a single story over an extended time period.

The News now has six full-time newsroom reporters and two sports reporters.

Buzbee said he had no idea the extent the Internet would have on newspapers. The move to online news could mean someday not having a printed copy of the paper, he said, but added he hoped it wouldn't go away.

"I'm not nearly as optimistic as I was 10 years ago," he said, adding he even uses the Internet to read other newspapers.

Montgomery said the future of newspapers is a question he often is asked. Readers are getting their news from several platforms today, including by mobile phones, Kindles and iPads. They use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, also, to stay current.

"How long will The News still be printed on paper? Who knows? Many people still covet a physical morning paper with their coffee, and that is in part generational. But news on paper also might become something of a boutique product, something still enjoyed on Sundays or in coffee shops," he said.

"We are in transition, and really consumers are in control. We'll go where consumers go, and we'll publish on whatever platforms make sense and are in demand. For now, print circulation is relatively steady.

"No matter the medium, however, I am confident that The Hutchinson News will be here for another 140 years," he said. "We will continue to do what we always have done, which is report the news and tell the stories of the communities we cover, and connect businesses to consumers through advertising and marketing. We just are doing it in many more ways than we have in the past."