

Editing the Mifflinburg Telegraph

by

Mary Lee Jensen

It has been almost forty years since I left the Mifflinburg Telegraph -- my less than two-year stint as an editor of the newspaper only a small blip in its 150-year history. I began work at the Telegraph on March 20, 1979 and ended my job on August 1, 1980. In reflecting on my tenure, I now realize how little I knew then about its importance to the community and how naïve I was about so many local issues.

I was offered the position of editor soon after graduating from college, having moved to Lewisburg from the Philadelphia area to accompany my husband who was completing graduate work at Bucknell University. I had no journalism background apart from some time spent working on junior high and high school newspapers, but the Telegraph was not about hard-hitting investigative reporting. It was a weekly that was pretty much published as a community service since I doubt it ever made much of a profit – that came from the printing side of the business.

I knew how to write and must have met enough hiring criteria for Harris Lemon, the then publisher of the Telegraph, to give me a chance – although I quickly tested his confidence. The Mifflinburg High School wrestling team had just won the state title and they had been escorted through town by the Mifflinburg fire trucks the day before I started on the job. This was a big deal and I accompanied the front-page account with the banner headline below. I was pleased with myself for having completed my very



Masthead and my inaugural (misspelled) headline

first issue of the paper and was certain that extra copies would be sold. That brief optimism lasted until the next morning when Harris called me into his office and, pointing to the headline, gently mentioned that I might want to pay a little more attention to grammar and spelling for the next issue. I am still embarrassed by the mistake all these years later.

As editor of a community newspaper, I was indeed a “Jill of all trades.” Little did I know when I accepted the position that I would be doing much more than writing and proofreading articles! Job responsibilities included gathering news information, taking photographs, selling advertising, laying out the paper, transporting the galleys to the printer and delivering copies of the paper to drop-off points. It was never boring and challenged me to master new skills – including throwing cow chips at the county fair where I represented the Telegraph in the VIP competition (and won)!

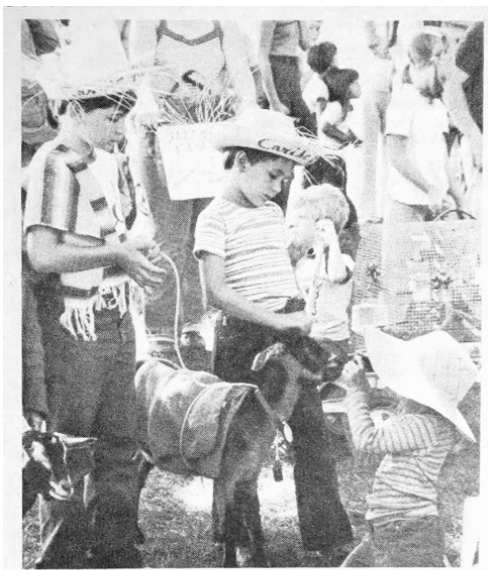
Putting together a weekly newspaper had a set rhythm. Thursday morning through the following Tuesday was spent pulling together information for the next issue. Stories either came through the mail as press releases (such as the one from the Department of Transportation announcing that photos would be appearing on all driver licenses by 1984) or were dropped off at the Telegraph office (this happened most frequently for news of weddings, reunions and obituaries). Other leads were supplied by my co-workers who were local to Mifflinburg and more “in the know” than myself.



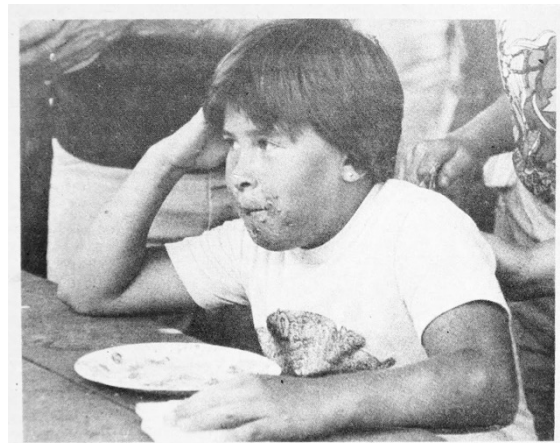
Three members of the Mifflinburg Community Ambulance Service recently received certificates of recognition from the American Red Cross for their use of CPR techniques in the near-drowning of a Mifflinburg Boy, John Yost, on June 14. Alvin Hoffman, Jr., Captain of the Mifflinburg Ambulance Association is shown here with the award recipients [l. to r.]: Tim Klose, Tod Steese, and Ken Yoder.

The focus of the Telegraph was always local news. Here volunteers for the Community Ambulance Service were recognized for their efforts in saving the life of a local boy who had nearly drowned.

The paper regularly included news from local organizations – the Kiwanis, the Athenaeum Club (bible study) and the Twentieth Century Club. Even in the late 1970s, each of the women’s groups maintained the protocol of listing members’ names with the title “Mrs.” or “Miss.” School sports coverage was supplied by Bob Derr, a freelancer, and there always seemed to be a steady supply of news from the Young Farmer’s Association, the 4-H and the Future Farmers of America. “Coming Events” included notices about events such as the Mifflinburg Firemen’s Carnival, the Laurelton Girl Scouts litter pickup and Heritage Days in New Berlin.



Josh and Lucas Koch and Alethea Abramson took first place in the miscellaneous pets category of the Kiwanis Club's pet parade.
[Photo by Kieth Orndorf]



Pie-eating contests, bingo, volleyball, games, food and fun are sure to abound at this year's 4th of July Celebration in Mifflinburg. Shown here is Renee Estes, first place winner in her age group in last year's pie eating contest. Will she try to retain her title this year? Only Renee can answer that question.

Festivals, such as the 4th of July celebration, received regular coverage. Community events, like the Kiwanis pet parade and the pie-eating contest, received regular coverage.

Routinely, Charles McCool “Cool” Snyder stopped by my office to bring copy for his “Trail of History” column that highlighted some aspect of Mifflinburg’s past – usually accompanied by a photograph like this one:



Trail of History column was frequently accompanied by photos such as this one taken by Grover Bierly in 1915 of Charles F. Snyder driving a dairy wagon from his farm. The photo was taken in front of the former Buffalo Valley Telephone Company building on N. Fourth Street.

Other photos were taken by me with the paper's black and white Polaroid camera. These included such ordinary subjects as the new street lights on the corner of 4th and Chestnut Streets, participants in the elementary school's annual Turtle Race and Frog Jumping Contest, and a trio of brothers on their way home from school. Mifflinburg resident, Keith Orndorf, also supplied photos of community and school events. The paper also featured a regular column titled, "Do You Remember?" that included snippets from Telegraphs from ten, twenty-five and fifty years ago. Items like this one were a reminder that any news about neighbors was, at one time, worthy of inclusion in the Telegraph:

"July 17, 1930 – The barn at the rear of the Ethel M. Koons shoppe was badly damaged Tuesday afternoon as the result of Mrs. Samuel Haire cranking her Chevrolet truck while it was in gear. Mrs. Haire was not injured."

In addition to news that came into the office, I would also gather information on real estate transactions and wills from the Union County courthouse in Lewisburg and "new arrivals" from Evangelical Community Hospital. Another assignment was to attend monthly school board meetings. This was during a period when anti-property

tax sentiment was pervasive in the community and discontent against any non-essential expenditures ran high. The meetings often were attended by residents with strong opinions and they went late into the night. I wrote a few editorials that encouraged more understanding on both sides.

My other responsibility was to secure advertisements for the paper – not one of my strengths. I was always so grateful when Central Counties Bank (offering 5 ¼% passbook savings at the time) or Mifflinburg Motors (selling a Pinto Pony for only \$3334) came through with a full-page ad. Classifieds were free and so generated no revenue.

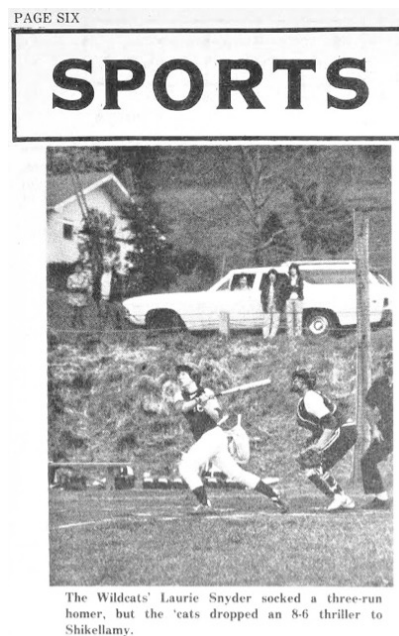
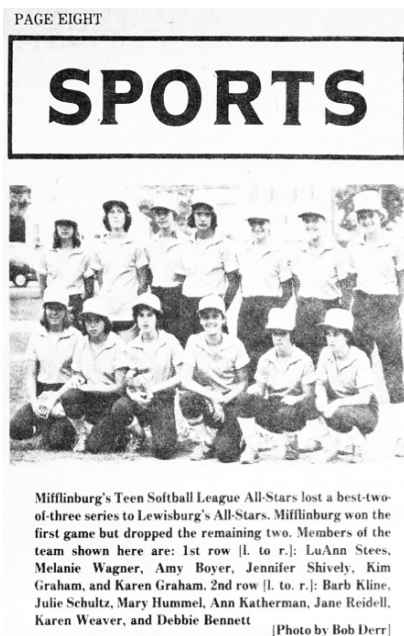
Once the content for that week's issue was finalized the copy had to be typeset. Although the print shop of the Telegraph still used a letterpress process for some of their jobs, the newspaper relied on newer technology. Linda Campbell, a long time employee of the Telegraph, used a phototypesetter to produce column width galleys. These then had to be trimmed and run through a waxer. The wax on the back of the galleys allowed items to stick to the layout sheets, but also to be moved around as the week, and stories, evolved. I quickly learned on the job how to make everything fit into five columns on twelve pages – the standard length of the paper.

Layout was generally completed by Tuesday night - except when there was some breaking event that required last minute additions. One of those occasions included local elections. Since these always occurred on a Tuesday, I would have to wait at the County election offices until all the results were in and the paper ballots had been counted (this often lasted until 3:00 in the morning). I would write most of the column beforehand and then, after the winners were officially announced, just insert the names into the story. The column had to be almost immediately typeset so that it could be included in that week's paper. No one wanted to wait a week to find out who had been elected as county commissioner.

Wednesday morning was the absolute deadline for changes and additions. The day would begin with my commute from Lewisburg to the Telegraph office where I would edit any last-minute stories or add photographs. Once the layout was finalized, I would drive the 40 minutes to Danville – making sure to get there no later than 10:30 am. Since the format of the Telegraph was the same as the *Danville News*, we used their presses and punctuality was key. Being late with our paper would interfere with their

schedule for the rest of the day. After consulting with the pressman about any photographs that had to be inserted, I would walk around the town for about an hour while the paper was run through the presses, and copies put into bundles and secured with twine. It was then my job to drive the papers back to Mifflinburg, dropping stacks off at the high school and a few other locations around town. The rest of the papers were delivered to the Telegraph backroom where they were labeled and prepared for mailing to subscribers. I would then leave the office in the afternoon, ready to start the process again the next morning.

The Mifflinburg Telegraph did not offer groundbreaking news or scandalous revelations. Being a weekly, most people in town were already aware of what was being reported by the time the paper landed in their mailboxes. So, what then was its value to the community? Many years after my brief tenure as editor, I found the answer to this question in Ithaca, New York where I now live.

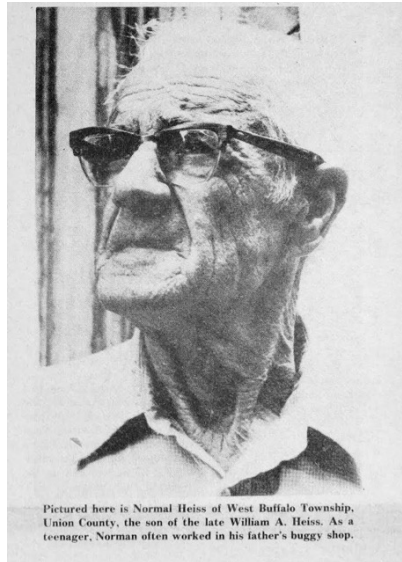


The paper often included sports photos taken by Bob Derr like these of Mifflinburg's Teen Softball League All-Stars and the Wildcats baseball team.

Employed by Ithaca College at the time, I found myself working with Randy, a woman who happened to have grown up in New Berlin. After a few discussions about Mifflinburg and her time there, I shared with her my bound copy of the Telegraph issues

from my time as editor. Coincidentally, she had been in high school during that time and took great pleasure in flipping through the pages to see the faces of people she knew.

Randy shared with me that for her the importance of the Telegraph was its local focus. She said that people read the paper because they knew that there was always a chance that they might see their name mentioned on any given week. Today, with so many newspapers being owned by large corporations or ceasing operations entirely, the absence of such local print platforms makes that observation more poignant.



Normal Heiss, son of William A. Heiss owner of the Mifflinburg Buggy Works. Efforts were underway at the time to restore the former buildings to a Buggy Museum.

Throughout its history each issue of the Telegraph provided a snapshot of life in Mifflinburg and the west end of Union County – whether it was a report of damage to electrical wires by B.B. guns, disorderly conduct at the Scarlet D Tavern, the establishment of a buggy museum, or a hero's welcome given by the town for their state champions. I am proud to have served as editor – just one of many in the long history of the newspaper.