



Photos by Sarah Beal

The Elgin Courier has been around for more than 130 years. Above: From left are S. J. Isaacks, C. W. Webb and Basil Olds in the newspaper's building in 1898 in a photo from the book 'Elgin: A History of Elgin, Texas 1872-1972,' which was compiled by members of the Elgin Historical Committee. Isaacks and Webb were the owners at the time. Right: Printing supervisor Clifton Green, who has been at the paper for more than 30 years, checks the calibration of the printing press.



START SPREADING THE *News*

Small-town papers are still Central Texas page-turners and essential voices in their communities

By Ed Crowell

EACH ISSUE OF A LOCAL newspaper offers a time capsule of contemporary life, capturing the ups and downs of any town, big or small.

Community newspapers across the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area are by, for and about local residents. Their unique blend of hyper-local news, school sports stories, community events coverage and personality-driven columns by local residents keeps readers paying attention — and paying to read.

Many of them have been publishing for well over 100 years, too.

While big newspapers in Houston, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio and some other cities publish seven days a week, this region's small-town newspapers print once, twice or three times a week. Most now offer digital versions or news update emails.

In addition to their longevity and remaining the resource of record for many communities, they perform an important service: getting useful information to readers, said Jeff Wick, the enthusiastic managing editor of the Fayette County Record.

"Community newspapers like us are still vital because nobody besides us is doing in-depth coverage of local government and law enforcement," he said. "Nobody besides us is interviewing local athletes as they excel. Nobody besides us is reaching the ever-growing numbers of people who are turning away from social media as a reliable source of news."

Wick, who began working at the newspaper in 2009, says the twice-weekly Record's circulation is growing. "We have a very loyal subscriber base. While most newspapers have seen

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Many community newspapers have a small staff requiring employees to wear a variety of hats. Heather Ott serves as general manager and publisher of the Elgin Courier but also shoots photos for the paper.



Editor Roy Sanders with the archives of the of the Burleson County Tribune, which began publishing in 1884. Yellowing print copies and a pair of old typewriters don't reflect the Caldwell-based paper of today: 243 of its 3,129 subscribers read the digital version.

AN UNUSUAL ownership arrangement is in place for two weeklies in Bastrop County. The Bastrop Advertiser and The Smithville Times are published by the daily Austin American-Statesman, which is owned by the national Gannett Co. newspaper chain.

The newspapers have deep community roots. The Bastrop Advertiser was first published in 1853 and today has 5,000 subscribers. The Smithville Times, with 2,500 subscribers, began publishing in 1894.

Andy Sevilla has been editor of the two community papers since 2015. He and one full-time reporter write for both the Advertiser, which has Thursday and Saturday editions, and for the Times' single Thursday edition. He writes two or three stories a week and the reporter writes at least five stories a week.

Their articles often appear on the Austin American-Statesman website, statesman.com, and occasionally in that paper's print edition.

Content overlaps in the two papers at times, such as news from the Bastrop County Commissioners Court meetings. The towns are only 13 miles apart, so major news events in one town are likely of interest in the other. Business coverage also often overlaps.

The front page of each edition is "hyper local" for each town, though, Sevilla said.

Both papers typically are 12 pages on Thursdays, and on Saturday the Bastrop edition is usually 8 pages.

Freelance columnist Debbie Moore writes about social, historical and entertainment events. Bill McCann, Joni Ashbrook and Don Loucks all write political opinion columns twice a month.

"We cover all the major high school sports as much as we can with freelancers," Sevilla said.

The pandemic kept Sevilla away from the newspaper's office in Bastrop, but he said remote coverage of government meetings was possible when public officials began meeting in an online format via Zoom.

Although the daily Austin American-Statesman is printed in Houston now, the Bastrop and Smithville papers are printed in Corpus Christi. That makes deadlines 24 hours in advance of publication. "We have to work harder to make sure the stories will



Photo by Laura Skelding

Andy Sevilla serves as editor of the Bastrop Advertiser and The Smithville Times. Behind him is Bastrop's iconic Old Iron Bridge across the Colorado River.

Bastrop Advertiser

FOUNDED: 1853

CIRCULATION: 4,667

EDITOR: Andy Sevilla

PUBLISHED ON: Thursdays & Saturdays

STAFF: 2 full-time

POPULAR CONTENT: City government stories

ONLINE: facebook.com/BastropAdvertiser

CONTACT: 512-321-2557; asevilla@statesman.com



FOUNDED: 1894

CIRCULATION: 1,011

EDITOR: Andy Sevilla

PUBLISHED ON: Thursdays

STAFF: 2 full-time

POPULAR CONTENT: Stories about development/growth

ONLINE: facebook.com/TheSmithvilleTimes

CONTACT: 512-321-2557; asevilla@statesman.com

still have a shelf life and are of value to the readers," Sevilla said.

During the pandemic, single-copy newspaper sales dropped dramatically at grocery and convenience stores and at Walmart, but those sales have been bouncing back recently.

"Growth is definitely making its way to the Lost Pines region, so a lot of our coverage involves the opening of new businesses," Sevilla said. Local government and school

news is a priority, too.

"The Bastrop Advertiser has a storied past as the oldest weekly newspaper still existing in Texas," Sevilla said. "With such a rich history, we put great effort into reflecting our community pride in the stories we tell.

"I love what I do, and I'd encourage anyone to pick up our papers and see how we cover our area."

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their print circulation plummet over the past decade, we've really held our own."

The coronavirus pandemic caused business closures and public gathering restrictions over the past 18 months that negatively affected newspapers, he said. But "we still have a very robust classified section. Retail print advertising has been curtailed by the pandemic, but we are hopeful that will return as local events (come back)

post-pandemic."

Wick and the Fayette County Record publisher Regina Barton Keilers had a conversation as the COVID-19 crisis began to unfold in early 2020 and non-essential businesses were closing.

"She asked if we should (close), too," Wick said. "I thought it was important to the community that we keep the doors open, a symbol that we're still here for you. Immediate pay-off came a few days later when the county judge strolls in and —

because we are open and available — let us know about Fayette County's first confirmed case of COVID."

In a pandemic, small newspapers are more important than ever, said Mike Hodges, executive director of the Texas Press Association. "That's the only way people in some communities can get current local information. You need that news in emergencies like this."

Up and down Main Street in small towns, many businesses closed temporarily

IN WASHINGTON County, the Brenham Banner-Press publishes three days a week with a personal touch on the bottom of every front page: “Happy birthday wishes to . . .”

Friends and relatives of people celebrating birthdays contact the paper with names and dates for Page One display. “It’s a nice tradition that’s been around longer than I’ve been here,” said Derek Hall, the publisher and editor who started at the Banner-Press as a photographer 21 years ago.

The newspaper published six days a week until the coronavirus pandemic hit, when many businesses closed or stopped advertising. Hall doesn’t foresee more than three issues a week anytime soon, but the paper emails breaking stories to its 1,000 digital subscribers. It has 4,500 total subscribers.

Fourteen full-time employees produce the paper, which has its own press. Eight other Houston-area newspapers are printed there. Most Banner-Press editions are 12 to 16 pages, with two or three magazine-style sections printed each month to celebrate seasons, holidays and events such as the annual German heritage-themed Brenham Maifest.

“We pride ourselves on being local first,” Hall said. “We’re here for the community. That’s our main objective.”

Another fixture at the bottom of the front page of each issue is a “Water Usage” list. Brenham is dependent on nearby Lake Somerville for drinking water and the lake is a popular fishing and boating area, so the lake levels are reported regularly. Rainfall amounts and city water use also are listed.

Two longtime column writers provide interesting viewpoints: Bill Neinast, a retired Army colonel, writes about the military and other issues, and Cathy Ganske writes about a variety of topics, ranging from gardening to politics, in Cathy’s Corner.

or for good because of the pandemic. “That means they were not advertising in the local papers. It’s been a struggle,” Hodges said.

At the same time, many public agencies were not easily accessible because of coronavirus restrictions, so newspapers have been relying more on open-record requests for public documents. “Some agencies were taking a month to respond, citing skeleton crews in offices and employees working from home. That was too long,”



Photos by Sarah Beal

The Banner-Press in Brenham still has its own press, as seen behind editor and publisher Derek Hall. An in-house printing press is uncommon in the newspaper business these days, especially for small papers.

The Banner-Press

CITY: Brenham

FOUNDED: 1866

CIRCULATION: 4,500

PUBLISHER/EDITOR: Derek Hall

PUBLISHED ON: Tuesdays, Thursdays & Sundays

STAFF: 12

NOTABLE STORIES: Wesley gas explosion,

April 7, 1992; Jon Peters breaking national record for consecutive wins by a high school pitcher, April 13, 1988

POPULAR CONTENT: Local news, obituaries and local sports; columnist Cathy Ganske, who covers topics ranging from gardening to politics

ONLINE: brenhambanner.com

CONTACT: 979-836-7956; derek@brenhambanner.com



Dwayne Rogge pulls a stack of newspapers from the folding machine, the final step in the printing process. Rogge has worked at the paper for more than 42 years. The newspaper, published three days a week, was founded 155 years ago.

Hodges said.

Texas has 75 daily newspapers and 388 weeklies, according to the Texas Press Association. “We’re a resource to help them manage their businesses in terms of sharing information,” Hodges said. “If they have a question, for example, of how to handle paid versus free obituaries, we connect them via [a group email list] to the experiences of other newspapers. That interaction with other publishers is priceless.”

The Texas Center for Community Jour-

nalism, based at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, is another resource for small newspapers. It provides free training on a variety of subjects to help small newspapers survive in an ever-changing business environment.

Publishers and editors of nine newspapers in the Bluebonnet region spoke about their publications and the role they play in their communities.

More community papers, next page

Burleson County Tribune

FOUNDED: 1884

CIRCULATION: 3,129

PUBLISHER: Sam Preuss

EDITOR: Roy Sanders

PUBLISHED ON:
Wednesdays

STAFF: 7 (including part-time)

NOTABLE STORIES:
1999 Texas A&M bonfire

tragedy; 9/11 coverage of local connections

POPULAR CONTENT:

Denise Squier's photos: She has won first-place honors for her sports photography by the Texas Press Association among large weekly papers.

ONLINE: bctribune.com

CONTACT: 979-567-3286; news@bctribune.com

THE BURLESON COUNTY Tribune, founded in 1884, is a small weekly newspaper with a long history. Based in Caldwell, the newspaper also covers news from the towns of Snook and Somerville. It has a paid circulation of 3,129. The digital issue is delivered to 243 subscribers.

Editor Roy Sanders said all local high school sports are big news in the area because so many families are involved.

In spring 2021, a 16-page issue featured five pages of coverage of high-school basketball games. Many large color photos captured the boys' and girls' teams in action.

The Burleson County Fair each September is another major source of news as students prepare, show and auction their animals. "It's our biggest event (to cover) by far," Sanders said.

The Tribune also devotes major coverage to the annual Kolache Festival in Caldwell and the yearly Chilifest country music event near Snook. The two-day Chilifest Music Festival draws thousands of fans from Texas A&M University, but the April show was canceled in 2020 and this



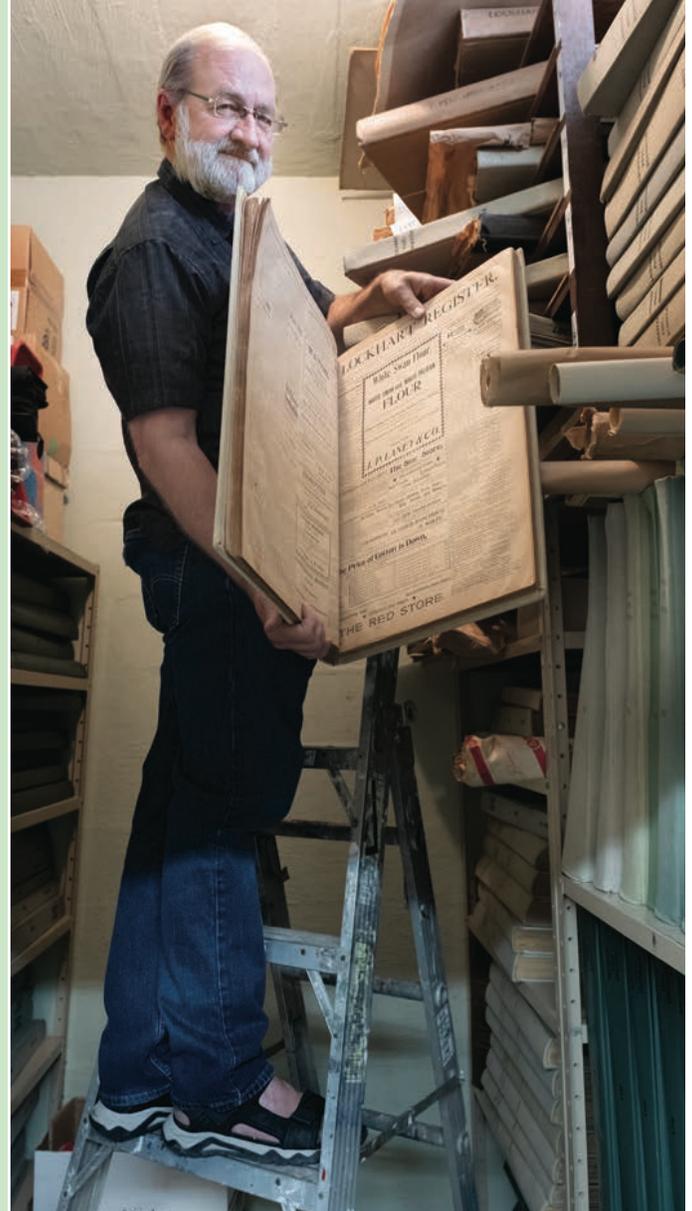
Denise Squier won a sports photography award for the trading cards the paper produced for high school seniors who played sports. Photo by Sarah Beal

year as well because of the coronavirus.

The paper has retained most of its advertisers during the pandemic. "It was more difficult, but we have a good footprint here in the area," Sanders said. "We take pride in the coverage we have that no one else can provide. There are many things in the Tribune not available elsewhere, except maybe on social media. But we think we're still rocking on."

Circulation is expected to rise, Sanders said. "We're seeing a lot of growth in Snook, with new homes being built for people who find they easily can commute to jobs at Texas A&M," he said.

Preuss Printing Co. owns the Burleson County Tribune and seven other Texas newspapers, including those in Luling (Caldwell County), Bellville (Austin County) and Giddings (Lee County).



FOUNDED: 1872

CIRCULATION: 2,000

PUBLISHER: Dana Garrett

PUBLISHED ON: Thursdays

STAFF: 5

MEMORABLE STORY: A county commissioner, defending himself in a meeting after an arrest for DWI, stated: 'I wasn't drunk, everyone knows you can't get drunk on draft beer.'

MOST POPULAR CONTENT: Lockhart's thrifty citizens enjoy Community Garage Sales; Editor Miles Smith's headlines

ONLINE: post-register.com

CONTACT: 512-398-4886; danagarrett@post-register.com



Photos by Laura Skelding

Left: Publisher Dana Garrett has preserved almost 150 years of bound volumes of newspapers inside a vault in the Lockhart Post-Register's building in downtown Lockhart. The newspaper was also recorded on microfilm. Digitizing 115,000 pages of the paper has to be 'my best accomplishment of the newspaper,' he said. He bought the paper when he was 24 and has owned it for 42 years. Above: The newspaper still has a very old Heidelberg letterpress. Garrett wants to eventually turn the building into a museum for the old newspaper and equipment.

IN CALDWELL COUNTY, the Lockhart Post-Register has been read by residents since 1872. Current publisher Dana Garrett bought the newspaper in 1979, at age 24.

He's seen many changes in the town and the newspaper in recent years, but nothing has affected his staff like the long-lasting pandemic.

"We went from eight staff members to just four when advertising drops hit us pretty bad," he said. "We acted like we just bought a new paper and started over again with zero-based budgeting."

Single-copy sales at H-E-B, Walmart and other locations dropped by half because many people used curbside pickup or self-service checkout for health safety. The paper's circulation is about 2,000 now, a decrease of 900 subscribers.

Still, Garrett is convinced the value of the Post-Register will win out. "When people look at our newspaper, they know what's in there is the truth. If they hear about rumors, they'll get the paper to see what's true. Facebook can't be trusted for that," he said.

Coverage of Lockhart's high school sports was tough when reporters and photographers were not allowed into games because of pandemic restrictions. "Coaches got us the information about games because they knew how important that was for the kids and parents," Garrett said.

Lockhart City Council and Caldwell County Commissioners Court coverage was also difficult when the meetings could only be viewed online. Discussions could not always be heard clearly and reporters were not there to ask questions following the meetings. "That was challenging and required a lot of calling after the meetings to clarify what was said," Garrett said. Fortunately, some of the meetings now are open for reporters to attend.

The Post-Register is usually 10 pages each week, with regular special sections for events such as the annual Chisholm Trail Roundup festival and the Diez y Seis celebration every September. The newspaper is printed in Bryan.

"I think community newspapers will come back just like movie theaters have done in recent years," Garrett said. "The theaters rebranded themselves with more comfortable seats and beer and such. Now, community newspapers are looking at how they can change for the better to keep up with the times."

ELGIN COURIER

FOUNDED: 1890

CIRCULATION: 2,300

PUBLISHER & GENERAL MANAGER: Heather Ott

MANAGING EDITOR: Julianne Hodges

PUBLISHED ON: Wednesdays

STAFF: 4

NOTABLE COVERAGE: Western Days, McDade Watermelon Festival, Elgin's Original Rodeo, county firework shows

POPULAR CONTENT: Sports, Police Log/Jail Blotter

ONLINE: elgincourier.com

CONTACT: 512-285-3333; publisher@elgincourier.com

AT THE 131-YEAR-OLD Elgin Courier in Bastrop County, Heather Ott has been slowly transitioning to the publisher's role after serving as general manager for 10 years. Her first job was as a receptionist in the front office before moving into advertising sales. She is a third-generation Courier employee.

Two full-time reporters and a "whole bunch" of freelance writers and photographers fill the paper each Wednesday, Ott said. Stories are updated online as needed. The newspaper has 2,300 subscribers.

An annual "Best of the Best Readers' Choice Awards" special section last spring showed how grateful Elgin residents were in difficult times. More than 17,000 votes were cast for favorite local businesses and owners, four times more than in previous years.

Once a month, special sections focus on town events and professions including medical services, high school graduation and the annual Western Days festival.

A long wrap-up article about life during a full year of the pandemic in Bastrop County ran on the front page in March. An updated list of county coronavirus case numbers and vaccine availability was printed weekly until recently.

In addition to paid subscriptions, the Courier sends 400 copies of the paper to local public schools for the Newspapers in Education program.

"People say newspapers are dead, but I say that's wrong," Ott said. "Our community is what keeps us alive and kicking. I'm happy to say a lot of people around town love us and look to us for events and news."



Heather Ott,
publisher of the
Elgin Courier

Other Bluebonnet-area community newspapers

- Bellville Times
- Columbus Banner Press
- Luling Newsboy & Signal
- Manor Journal/Community News
- New Ulm Enterprise
- Sealy News
- San Marcos Daily Record



Photos by Sarah Beal

The Giddings Times & News is a Preuss family business: From left, Sloan Preuss is managing editor, his mother Louise is the page designer and his father Buddy is the publisher.

THE GIDDINGS TIMES & News is a long-lived publication in Lee County, first published in 1888. It is part of a family-owned and operated group of seven weekly newspapers under the Preuss Printing Co. banner.

Sloan Preuss is managing editor in Giddings and one of the sons of company founder and Times & News publisher Buddy Preuss, who has been writing two columns for the Giddings paper for more than 50 years.

“One is the Viewpoint column about people and events of interest, and the other is a religious column called Solid Ground, about teachings in the Bible,” Sloan Preuss said.

In his Viewpoint of June 17, Buddy Preuss described a fast-moving thunderstorm that lifted a storage building off its foundation at Wilbert’s Tire Center in Giddings.

In the same column he wrote about mushrooms, which “I’ve grown to really like eating as part of a meal. . . . One thing I didn’t know is that mushrooms make good fertilizer for gardens. I recently learned that from a friend and loyal reader.”

That June issue of the Giddings Times & News, which has a circulation of 5,200, featured seven front-page stories, including one about a favorable Lee County government audit, another about the Lee County 4-H healthy lifestyles team winning a state competition and one about the new superintendent for the Dime Box Independent School District. The 12-page issue concluded with photos from the Dime Box High School graduation ceremony.

Sloan Preuss said Giddings has changed a lot since he started at the newspaper in 1995. “We’ve seen it go from a small, quiet town to one

with more chain stores and businesses” along two busy highways, U.S. 290 and U.S. 77. “Travelers stop and enjoy our town with more places to eat and shop now.”

There’s a shortage of houses for sale in town, he said, but new houses are being built and subdivisions are planned.

Subscriptions to the newspaper did not change much during the pandemic, Sloan Preuss said. Many stores in Giddings managed to stay open. The Lee County Fair was canceled in 2020 and again this year due to the pandemic, and that affected advertising sales. Good news: The annual event is expected to return in 2022.



Cindy Terrell is publisher and editor of the Lexington Leader, and Mike Organ has been covering sports for the paper since 1998. ‘He is so important to this paper because sports is still king in a lot of readers’ minds,’ she said. Organ retired from coaching and teaching for the Lexington school district in 2004 and ‘is still sought out by LISD to be the voice in the press box during home football and baseball games,’ Terrell said.

Giddings Times & News

FOUNDED: 1888

CIRCULATION: 5,200

PUBLISHER: Buddy Preuss

MANAGING EDITOR: Sloan Preuss

PUBLISHED ON: Wednesday

STAFF: 5

POPULAR CONTENT: Viewpoint, a humor/general interest column, and Solid Ground, a non-denominational religious column, both written by Buddy Preuss for more than 50 years; Sports Corner, written by Sloan Preuss for more than 30 years

ONLINE: giddingstimes.com

CONTACT: 979-542-2222;
buddy@giddingstimes.com

THE FAYETTE COUNTY Record was first published in 1922 and has been owned by publisher Regina Barton Keilers and her family since 1976.

In addition to the twice-weekly paper, “we also connect with readers via printed glossy monthly specialty magazines, our website, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter,” managing editor Jeff Wick said. The newspaper has 5,278 subscribers (693 of whom read the digital edition), Wick said, and a free copy of the newspaper is mailed monthly to every mailbox in Fayette County as an enticement for others to subscribe.

The Record aggressively covered the record-breaking winter storm that hit Texas in February, with four stories and two large photos on the front page of the usual 12-page edition. Inside that issue of March 2, 2021, the paper featured a full-page Black History Month story describing Fayette County’s first two freedom colonies. Also in the issue were columns from correspondents in the small Fayette County towns of Muldoon and Carmine, as well as school and sports news, and obituaries.

Advertising ranged from a full page of classified ads to display ads on the news pages for a photography studio, a wedding shop and a mattress store. Small ads for a wide variety of businesses filled about two pages. ■



Lexington Leader

SERVING LEE COUNTY, TEXAS

FOUNDED: 1997

CIRCULATION: 1,000

PUBLISHER & EDITOR: Cindy Terrell

PUBLISHED ON: Thursdays

STAFF: 1 full-time, 5 part-time

NOTABLE COVERAGE: Annual

Memorial Day issue

POPULAR CONTENT: Columns by Stanley Miller and Peggy Brown

ONLINE: lexingtonleader.com

CONTACT: 979-773-3022;
editor@lexingtonleader.com

WHILE SEVERAL newspapers in the Bluebonnet region were founded well over 100 years ago, the Lexington Leader is relatively new. The Leader started in 1997 under publisher Rita Owen. In 2015, Owen retired and Cindy Terrell bought the newspaper.

“I had been a community education teacher but was always interested in newspapers,” Terrell said. “I remember as a kid hearing the phrase ‘sensational news sells’ and being intrigued by that.”

Terrell, now publisher and editor, is the only full-time employee at the weekly. She has five part-timers who work in advertising sales and production. The paper counts 1,000 paid subscribers, 300 of whom read the electronic version.

Two Leader columnists who captivate readers, Terrell said, are

Stanley Miller, who writes about historic events and people, and Peggy Brown, who writes humorously about politics and other subjects.

Dozens of color photos, particularly of high school sports events, are common in the Leader. “You do what kids want and are used to. That’s color,” Terrell said.

The Leader went big and bold covering the crippling ice and snowstorm in February of this year. Under the headline ‘PICTURES=1,000 WORDS,’ a half-page photo showed a lone pickup driving through a whiteout in the middle of town. The caption said the image looked like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie, as if the Earth had entered an ice age, adding that the photo was “the view from in front of Peterson’s grocery store.”



THE FAYETTE COUNTY RECORD

FOUNDED: 1922

CIRCULATION: 5,300

PUBLISHER & OWNER: Regina Barton Keilers

MANAGING EDITOR: Jeff Wick

PUBLISHED ON: Tuesdays & Fridays

STAFF: 8 full-time

NOTABLE COVERAGE: Hurricane Harvey’s devastating impact; car accident photo by Wick won first place, action photo, 2014 National Newspaper Association annual contest

POPULAR CONTENT: Sports; Community Correspondence section (pieces written by area residents); before her death at 85 in 2020, Gladys Giese’s Warda News column

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jeff@fayettecountyrecord.com

Jeff Wick has worked for The Fayette County Record for 12 years, eight in his current role as managing editor. Behind him is the Fayette County Courthouse in La Grange.