

## **Press Enterprise**

The history of the Press-Enterprise as told to Patchwork by Brandon Eyerly.

Interviewed by Matt Gilbert and Steve Bercher in the spring of 2003

Brandon Eyerly grew up in Columbia County and went to high school at Central Columbia. Later he moved out of state to go to college and then to Arizona and finally back to Columbia County. He has lived for the last five and a half years with his wife Lynette. He is now 34 years old.

He has worked at the Press Enterprise an associate publisher since coming back to Columbia County. His father is the owner of the Press Enterprise which has remained in the family for three generations.

**PATCHWORK:** How did the Press Enterprise get started?

**EYERLY:** Well, it started on March 1, 1902. My great-grandfather and Matt your great-great-grandfather started the paper. He was a 23-year old postal worker, who saw the coming of rural free delivery, in which you would no longer have to go to the post office to pick up your mail if you lived out in the rural areas. As this started happening across the country, it started in the late 1800's, the later part of the 19th century; they started offering this as a service out in the west. I forget exactly the state, but anyway, it started spreading and started becoming more and more popular, and they knew that would start happening here. He saw the writing on the wall and knew that in an area like this, if he had a newspaper, he would be able to use the mail to get his newspapers out in a rural area like we have here. And he wouldn't have to deal with the distribution hassles of having a rural area, where you have to by horseback really go 10 miles 15 miles to deliver a paper. At the time there were only about a handful of cars in the area, so it obviously made it a lot easier on him to have rural free delivery. So he saw that coming. He started when he was in Bloomsburg the Bloomsburg Post Office. He created a list of about 600 names while he was working the window. These people are coming to pick up their mail. There were about 600 names of possible subscribers and he also partnered with a guy by the name of Charles Vanderslice. C.T. Vanderslice and his father used to own the Bloomsburg Daily, which was the newspaper that existed before the Morning Press. And C.T. Vanderslice had the printing expertise and my great-grandfather had the journalistic background. He worked

for the Grit actually for a few years before starting publication when he was 23. So that's how the newspaper kind of came together. The two guys started. It was March 1, 1902. There was a flood at the time, so they started on the Main Street location, which is where the PNC bank machines, the PNC Mac machine, if you know where that is on Main? It is actually Main and Market and the PNC Bank, well where the Mac machine is, there used to be a building called the Dentler Boot Building. And they started off in the basement of that building, which is obviously no longer there, it is an empty lot. But they started off in the basement of that building and the flood water they were up to their knees in flood water, they were bailing the water out in order to get their first paper out. So as the water was rising, they are trying to bail it because they were trying to get their very first edition out. But, they did get their edition out. It turned out, they were one of the few newspapers that got out that day. A lot of the other competitors were flooded, and couldn't deliver and get a newspaper out so we immediately had a step up, a leg up on the competitors and that enabled him to have a big advantage over the other competitors in the area so that is really how they got started. They had a lot of coverage of the flood which obviously interested a lot of people since it was pretty much taking over the town at the time and he and his partner then continued to publish the newspaper in 1903. The Berwick-Enterprise, which was a weekly switched to a daily which became The Berwick Daily Enterprise in 1903. That paper was started by a gentlemen by last name Resely, r-e-s-e-l-y, and he published the paper for four years before selling out to Eyerly and Vanderslice who purchased the publication and then there was a trolley that went between Berwick and Bloomsburg and he would do one newspaper which was a morning paper then he would do the other newspaper which was an afternoon paper. So he would do one newspaper, go to Berwick do the other newspaper and then come back pretty much work 14 to 16 hour days doing both newspaper for quite some time until they were able to hire more staff and able get more help. But they were very long days and he worked very hard on that for quite some time so that is how the newspapers got started. They published separately until July 1, 1983 at which point they merged and they became the Press-Enterprise. The Berwick Enterprise was an afternoon publication. It switched to morning edition on July 1, 1983 and at that time that's when they became the Press Enterprise so they started publishing six days a week at that point and they switched to seven days a week back in 1996. They became a seven day a week daily newspaper and published 365 days a year. And now that's how the newspaper got started, unless you want me to expand into commercial printing and all that other stuff.

PATCHWORK: How did the general public react to the first issue?

EYERLY: A very favorably. In fact, right out of the gates they got a lot of, they sold quite a few copies. Again, they were the only paper distributing. So they had a leg up on their competition, when there was a choice between nothing and their paper. They had a lot of flood coverage, which is the reason why the people couldn't get their other paper. It was very interesting to them, so it was very well received from day one. And so was Resely's paper, when he started the daily newspaper in 1903, The Berwick Daily Enterprise. That was very, very well received as well, that was very popular. He had a lot of local news. They followed a lot of the similar beliefs and a lot of the similar they were similar in their dedication to local news. And that also was a very popular paper until they purchased it. They expanded it when they purchased it, but it was very well received in the beginning as well.

PATCHWORK: How does the paper today compare to the first issue?

EYERLY: It's about 100 years older. The newspaper today, I would say, we used to do small advertisements like one line advertisements on the front page in 1902. We no longer do that. Of course it's obviously a much bigger newspaper. Today we have our average, we are looking at 32 to 36 pages is our average size of our publication. At the time, the very first publication was technically 4 pages. It was one big sheet but if you fold it in half, it was four pages front back front back. There is obviously a big size difference in what we were able to offer. To some extent we have become a competitor with the post office. Back then, of course, we relied heavily on the post office to deliver our product now the post office U.S. Postal Service is a competitor of ours in the sense that we distribute flyers for, you know obviously, Sears, Wal-Mart, J. C. Penney's. We can go on and on, we distribute those 7 days a week and the postal service is also in the business of distributing direct mail flyers and retail flyers and that sort of thing, store circulars. To some extent now, we kind of compete with them back then it was almost as if we were leveraging off the strength of the postal service and now we are competitors. That's a big difference because back then we didn't have the distribution of flyers that we have today. That is two of the ways things have changed. Graphically, back in 1902, you didn't see photos. It was a big deal to have photos in a publication. Today it is obviously a lot easier when you have digital cameras, entirely digital cameras; we are not on film any more. Right now as we speak, they think there is a fire at BJ Ribs in Danville. And we will be able to get pictures and probably have them in the newspaper in matter of 15-20 minutes. They will bring them back here or they can even send them in remotely through FTP sites. So they can fit them in very quickly and the production capabilities and now with the offset color printing that started in 1972. But anyway, offset color printing today that we have was drafted in what we were doing before.

This enables us to do a lot more photographs, color, that sort of thing so that is probably how all those different areas have changed.

PATCHWORK: What have been the biggest stories covered by or reported by the Press Enterprise?

EYERLY: The biggest stories? I would say obviously, I would say they tend to be the more disastrous stories, unfortunately, but the flood of 1972 was one of our bigger stories that we covered. One of the things people obviously wanted to know about and read about kind of a traumatic event for the area. Fraternity fires at the university. We have had too many of those, but every time we have had them, of course that is the type of thing the international community likes to pick up over the wire. They like to run their newspapers over the wire when something like that happens. Some of the people can relate to and empathize with, so those kinds of stories tend to travel pretty well. The one that I know we made newspapers around the world, was when Joan Jett performed at the Bloomsburg Fair and someone threw a bracelet at her out of the audience, and it hit her in the head, and she like walked off stage. I was in Australia at the time. And in the Sydney Morning Herald there was this thing from Bloomsburg. It was our article picked up over the Associated Press. They were talking the Bloomsburg Fair and how this lady walked off the Bloomsburg Fair. Here I am in Sydney, Australia reading about the Bloomsburg Fair and how Joan Jett walked off the stage. So there's a lot of things I think in the past that have been some of our bigger stories. I'd say those are some of the more memorable stories that we have done.

PATCHWORK: How does today's staff compare to the staff of the first issue?

EYERLY: The staff of the first issue they were very, very lean. My great-grandfather wrote a lot of the stories himself. He didn't have a lot of help. And even 10 years later, I would say that you could that the total works force, which included some of the carriers. You were looking at maybe 10 to 15 people in the early days of the newspaper. Today the newspaper itself probably has a 110, 120 employees, so obviously a lot more employees. That is when I'm describing the Morning Press. That was just the Morning Press. You also had the Berwick Enterprise staff, but still you are probably looking at 20-30 people back then. We have 110 today so a lot more people working here. It takes a lot more people to run a web offset press like we have, so that also has been a big change, and a reason why we had to add a lot more people. But our newsroom, we employ the equivalent of 27 people in our newsroom. And back then they were looking at a handful of people in their newsrooms to fill obviously 4 pages of news versus 32 to 36 pages of news. It takes a lot more people and

photographers and everything else. So the staff is dramatically different today than it was back then.

PATCHWORK: What led to the idea for papers to be delivered 365 days a year?

EYERLY: It was a commitment to basically to covering the news that happens 365 days a year. And it was very difficult, because it would require our people to work Christmas day and New Year's Day, a lot of the holidays they were used to having off. We found ways of trying to accommodate them, same with our carriers, which is hard for the carriers as well. They got to deliver 365 days a year, 7 days a week. They don't get a break. But we met with everyone to discuss this. And that was one of the things that came up. Do we want to make that commitment where we are a 7 day a week daily newspaper and 365 days a year? We are going to cover every single day? And overwhelmingly, all the department managers who were responsible for staffing and working a lot of the holidays themselves said yes it was something that was very important to them. So at that time we made the decision to go 365 days a year 7 days a week.

PATCHWORK: What was the editorial policy of the first paper?

EYERLY: Heavy emphases on local news. He was very adamant about independence of editorial content versus outside influences. He told the story before he died, I think it was sometime in 1940's. He told the story about how the local fixer from the brewery came in to try to buy influence and basically buy the editorial content of the newspaper. So they would say, you know, "Hey, we will buy 10 or 15 thousand dollars worth of advertising", which back then was a lot of money, especially to entrepreneurs struggling to make their payments, to make their payroll. And they were approached and said, "If you take all this advertising money, we expect you to be very, very favorable, write very favorably towards the liquor and alcohol industry." Because at the time, of course you are starting to see the prohibition was starting to kick in and they really wanted to get basically your present day lobbying was occurring back then. Through editorial influence was what they're trying to do and that's something they turned down. They said they didn't want outside influence, they didn't want advertising to influence the editorial content and they wanted to in his words, "We are not that kind of paper." I have heard the stories as well from some of the other breweries in Pennsylvania that they tried to buy influence as well back then. That was the very popular thing to do. Try to buy influence from local newspapers and have them write favorably for exchange for cash. That's something they were adamantly opposed to.

PATCHWORK: Was the Press-Enterprise the first area newspaper?

EYERLY: No, absolutely not. We had at the time the newspaper started, the time the Morning Press started, there were a lot of area newspapers. I can give you some examples: The Millville Weekly Tablet; the Columbia County Republican; the Daily Mail, which was the Bloomsburg Daily, and then it was sold and became the Daily Mail; the Columbian was another one. And there were from time to time, through the past 130 years, a lot of other names as well. I mentioned the Millville Weekly Tablet, the Catawissa Advertiser, and the Benton Argus. The Benton Argus was in business till the 1960's. There were a lot of other newspapers even while we were publishing that also existed in the area. A lot of them are no longer around, but they had quite a bit of competition when the newspaper first started. And a lot of them at the time were closely aligned with your political views. And that was the other to answer your previous question. Going back even to that one. The editorial policy was along the lines that they were not going to be politically influenced; either they are going to try to report an unbiased centered type of reporting. It wasn't going to be a Republican Party publication or a Democratic Party publication. Which as you can tell by some of these names: Columbia County Republican, the Democrat, Democratic Sentinel, Bloomsburg Democrat, Democrat & Star, Columbian Democrat, Herald of Freedom, Columbian and Democrat. I mean you can tell that there were a lot of names that were aligned with political parties. And that was the other editorial change that he made, that they did not want to be aligned with any particular political affiliation. They wanted to be an independent, truly independent. So that's how they kind of separated. But there was a lot of competition at the time. There was quite a bit of newspapers operating in the area and they managed to do very well competing against them.