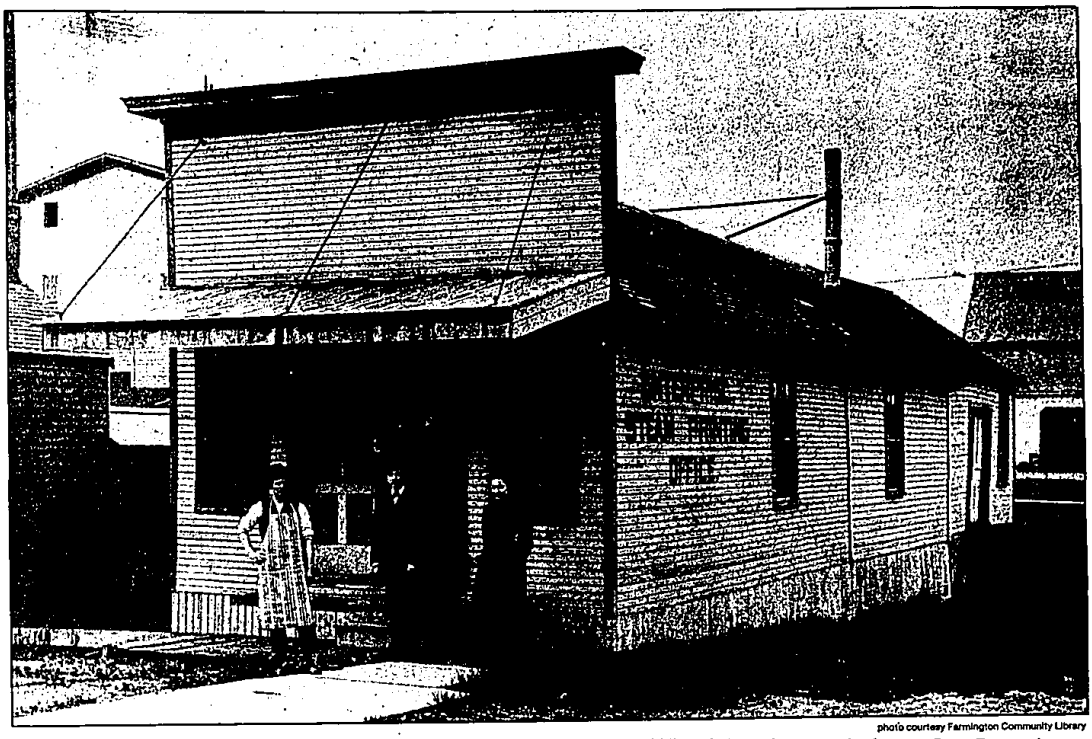

photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

An unidentified "printer's devil" stands at far left, Enterprise editor W.J. Richards is in the middle and Enterprise composing foreman Grace Tremper is on the right, circa 1905. This building, home to the Enterprise for nearly 30 years, was torn down in 1926.

'And when comparing today's suburban communities and community newspapers to those of a decade ago, only one conclusion can be reached. Both are better today.'
— Steve Barnaby managing editor

Early editors — an eclectic bunch

Jean Fox
local historian

EARLY EDITORS of the Farmington Enterprise were a varied and colorful lot.

When Edgar Rollin Bloomer, an energetic young man of 33, put out Vol. 1, No. 1 of the Enterprise on Nov. 2, 1888, prominently displayed beneath the masthead was the motto: "Independent in All Things — with Justice to All."

Subscriptions were $1 per year (52 issues). A few months later, he could boast the paper was being sent to 22 states and "nearly every county in Michigan."

Bloomer nursed his fledgling paper through 10 years of early issues. Mostly, these were four-page affairs, with several columns of advertising prominently displayed on Page 1. The interior featured popular novels of the day, serialized.

Smalltown newspapers of the late 19th century were, in effect, one-man operations. Editors had to be jacks-of-all-trades, else they could not survive. They owned the paper, lock, stock and barrel; getting it out once a week was a dedication akin to the preacher's Sunday sermon.

They set the type (often by hand) in the back room of a small shop; they roamed the street for advertising. They picked up occasional job printing, to help pay the bills. They were town boosters (a good editor made it unnecessary to have a chamber of commerce; indeed, it was not until the 1920s when editors moved to second floors and isolated themselves from the public that saw the birth of the chambers of commerce around the USA).

Versatile they undoubtedly were; and it is doubtful any one of them ever had heard of the Renaissance Man. And such was Bloomer, of the Enterprise.

IN 1898, he triumphantly published a Tenth Anniversary Edition on Nov. 4, a fine affair with stories (and ads) about Farmington's prominent businessmen. The Enterprise of the 1880s and '90s was all "type" — there were no pictures. But by the 10th anniversary, some small "cuts" — line drawings engraved into metal or wood — enlivened the pages. There were a few dim if foggy pictures. These were expensive, hence used sparingly.

Soon after the Tenth Anniversary Edition made its appearance, Bloomer moved to Sparta, Mich., where he bought and consolidated the Sentinel and Leader. And there, on Oct. 9, 1909, he died. His last words were: "Are the forms made up?"

In 1901, A.E. McKinnon was editor from February until September (by 1906 he is a reporter on the Detroit Free Press). The local weekly was acquired in 1901-02 by Harry N. McCracken, a well-known township farmer with apple orchards on 12 Mile, west of Drake. McCracken had been a teacher, school superintendent in the 1890s, and a state legislator.

During his tenure, the assassination of President William McKinley closed Farmington businesses for a full day, while 100 school children followed the GAR to a Town Hall decorated with bunting and flags. One could subscribe to the Enterprise *and* the Detroit Journal, a biweekly, for $1.75 a year.

THEN FOR nearly a year, July 1, 1904 until April 28, 1905, the Enterprise was owned and edited by Alex H. Smith, who lived on Grand River two doors down from Gov. Fred Warner. Smith was clerk for the Michigan House of Representatives; he died suddenly in 1905. How he combined editorial duties 70 miles away from Lansing is not revealed; but then, since Michigan had a really "part-time" legislature (which met from January to May only every two years), perhaps this was not an untenable task.

In 1905, Walter Richards took over; by now, the paper had a "printer's devil," a youth who helped out in the back room, or composing room. It had one linotype, a huge megalithic precursor of today's computers, which set type, one line at a time, a tremendous improvement over hand-set operations in which the printer (editor) picked up one letter at a time and pushed it onto a "stick."

Richards also had a young lady employee, who read proof and "wrote up" the local society items . . . "Mr. and Mrs. Byron Peirce spent the day in Detroit with her sister . . ." This was big news in Farmington in 1905 when the interurban, which made such long trips possible, was less than a decade old. One of Richards' big concerns was the whereabouts of the Japanese fleet, a force in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-06.

EDITORS CHANGE often. It was grueling work, six days a week, and the only edge it offered over farming was that it was done under a roof. After four years, Richards was succeeded by Calvin D. Goss, "editor and publisher," in 1908, by Frank E. Van Black and by C.D. Potter in 1909. Now, subscriptions were taken out in potatoes, apples, cabbage or turnips. And in 1910, Dr. J.A. Miller, was offering free vaccinations during the smallpox epidemic here.

By 1911, C.E. Ramsey was editor, and here a close relationship began with the Redford Record, launched in 1900 about seven miles down the Grand River Road. Ramsey ran both papers for about three years, during which time Michigan passed women's suffrage and the Bull Moose movement brought a Democratic postmaster to Farmington for the first time since the Civil War. Taft, 141; Roosevelt, 135, Wilson, 85. In Redford, Bull Moosers had a majority of 78.

Ramsey sold the paper in 1914 to J. Arch Price, "from Colorado." During this era, the Enterprise used much "boilerplate," pre-set editorial matter and serialized fiction. One icy February Friday, the roof of the newspaper building caught fire as the paper was being printed. Farmington's volunteer fire department came to the rescue, and catastrophe was averted. And the paper got out that week, natch.

In June 1915, Willis Edwin Lord came on as editor, introduced by Price in a retirement editorial as a man "with long experience as a newspaperman in Michigan." That's all. No what, where, when or why.

Lord bought the Enterprise building — today's Jerry's Bookstore — and made "improvements" in the paper. Lord opposed local option, and Farmington voted "wet" in the belief that liquor was good for business. But in 1916, Oakland County voted "dry"; that was also the year Pershing pursued Pancho Villa in an undefined area of the Southwest.

Two years after his arrival in town, Lord became Farmington village clerk, serving until 1919 when he was superseded by a returning war hero, Lt. Harley Warner. That fall, Lord printed the complete text of the covenant of the League of Nations and, in German, the entire text of the German peace treaty.

Lord died unexpectedly on April 10, 1920, just six months after he had bought a "new typesetting machine which could do the work of eight rapid compositors . . . revolutionizing printing," said the editor-publisher. The entire community mourned.

For six months, his widow and son controlled the paper while they looked around for a buyer. They were assisted by P.L. Perkins (Pete), "editor and manager" in charge of both the office and business, a tribute no doubt to his ability to get the paper off the press and out each week. (Pete also had a jazz band, locally popular.)

THEN IN September 1920, Wales Martaindale, a retired Detroit school superintendent who had come to Farmington to make his home, bought the Enterprise. His son George, a World War I veteran, was editor for a year until the paper became under the management of S.E. Brown on Nov. 4, 1921. Brown owned the Northville Record and, in 1905, had controlled the Grass Lake News.

Brown employed Franklin L. Whipple, who came to the editor's chair on March 1, 1922, when William N. and Nellie A. Miller emerged as owners and editors. The Millers had bought the paper from Brown with mortgage to Mergenthaler Linotype Co. of Chicago. Now, the editorial pages sprouted Josh Billings, a popular humorist, and Edna Ferber's "So Big," in installments.

Big issue of their tenure was the incorporation of the village of Farmington on Sept. 14, 1925. Miller was also president of the Oakland County Press Club. When they sold the Enterprise and left Farmington in 1927, the entire community turned out for a farewell party.

Hyman Levinson followed the Millers as editor in May. Main issue during his years was a proposal for widening Grand River through the village to 100 feet. Levinson opposed this, although it would be good for business; instead, he offered a bypass around town, which took another 40 years to attain. Fortunately for posterity, and with the aid of the Enterprise, this widening for "progress" failed, due either to an avid editor or lack of money for the "improvement."

AND SO they served during the first five decades of the paper's existence. Smalltown editors, big men in their community.

Selling their subscriptions for whatever they could get, chasing local merchants for ads, printing whatever news came into the office, but never the really important things that happened around town.

Paper, community no strangers

Steve Barnaby
managing editor

THINKING BACK, remembering how it used to be, can be dangerous business. After all, we tell ourselves, if we were there, it must have been great, it must have been better than great.

But most of the time, it's just our egos getting in the way.

And when comparing today's suburban communities and community newspapers to those of a decade ago, only one conclusion can be reached. Both are better today.

The paper delivered to your door in 1988, the publication you plunk down a quarter for on the drugstore counter or shove into the street vendor, is better than any suburban paper ever produced.

The same is true for your community.

That's right. Farmington and Farmington Hills really are better than the good old days.

I know, I know, it's easy to let the mind wander and think about how great it used to be. Lots of open space, farms, dirt roads, the tree in the middle of the road at Thirteen and Farmington, kids riding horses in downtown Farmington on warm summer evenings, all are part of the folklore.

AND IT would be tempting to look at the newspaper operation and cite some of the same lore:

Manual typewriters, big, thick editing pencils, copy paper with wood chips big enough to float down the Mississippi, late-evening deadlines that usually turned into early morning and cigarette smoke so thick that a person could barely see.

But none of it was really better. Just different and sometimes worse.

Take a break and spend some time over at the library reading old Observers and Enterprises. You'll remember things about your community you wish could be forgotten, and you'll read it in a newspaper that wasn't anywhere near as good as today's publication.

I make these observations easily. For an even decade, from August 1975 to August 1985, I was editor of the Farmington Observer. Certainly, I had a good time, sometimes even a great time. But I know that today, if I was the Farmington Observer editor, I would have an even better time.

Because of the technology available, I would be able to put out a better newspaper and I would be able to do it more efficiently with a better trained and more experienced staff.

I WOULDN'T have to write about residents who opposed the election of a school board member because he was Jewish. Neither would I have to spend several years combating those who opposed the construction of badly needed senior citizen housing in a community where none existed.

I wouldn't have to report that residents in one part of a subdivision refused to buy pumps so their neighbors wouldn't have raw sewage floating around their basements.

I wouldn't have to cover a city whose residents had never elected a woman to its council.

I also wouldn't have to be concerned that Farmington Hills would develop without a regional park for everyone in the community to enjoy the open spaces, no matter their income or racial designation.

Now that I've got your attention, I'm sure you can think of some tarnished gems from the past.

Sure the area is more congested. But that's only because more people are able to share in the economic dream that makes this country strong. It's a shallow problem when you look at how things used to be in the "good old days."

So enjoy the community of today and the newspaper that covers it. And work hard so both will get better in the future. After all, it was the pioneers of the past who made it possible for you to enjoy the present.

photo courtesy Farmington Community Library

Founding editor Edgar Rollin Bloomer at his desk in a corner of the Enterprise office in downtown Farmington Nov. 4, 1888.