

Local papers, readers owe a lot to Staley T. McBrayer



Phil Power

It was just a standard obit in last Saturday's New York Times. Staley T. McBrayer, who died at 92, was a smalltime Texas newspaper publisher and tinkerer.

But McBrayer took an unwanted German press and figured out how to adapt offset printing technology to making newspapers. In so doing, he revolutionized the newspaper industry and made possible the success of hometown newspapers like this one. His life is conclusive evidence of how a small innovation can spawn profound consequences that were completely unimagined at the time.

McBrayer started out working as advertising and business manager of The Commerce Journal, a weekly newspaper in Commerce, Texas. After a while, he bought several other small newspapers in the Fort Worth area. But the salaries of the Linotypists, who set in hot metal news stories and ads using a Rube Goldberg-like contraption called a Linotype machine, were "killing us," according to his partner, Jenkins Garrett.

So McBrayer and some employees in the back shop started tinkering around with how to set the type and print the newspapers cheaper than current technology allowed. They paid \$10,000 for a castoff press and figured out how to adapt offset printing to the production of newspapers. Abandoning the industry-standard but slow and clumsy Linotype machine, they perfected "cold type" photographic typesetting. Then they learned to transfer the image of a newspaper page to a thin metal plate. Ink adhering to the images on the plate was transferred — offset — to a rubber blanket which then transferred the image onto newsprint. And, eureka, offset printing!

At that time, most newspaper press manufacturers believed offset would never click for the fast rotary presses required to print newspapers. But the technology worked. Within 30 years after McBrayer's first press was developed in 1954, virtually all the newspapers in America were printed by offset.

His invention made the skills — and the high wages and the workplace stranglehold — of Linotype operators irrelevant, thereby setting off a

long, fierce struggle over the future of linotypists and other workers in the letterpress crafts.

"Cold type" typesetting was far easier, quicker and cheaper than the old "hot type" system. For example, when I started out in this business back in the 1960s, I used to write my column on a Linotype machine. If I was really flying, I could set it in around an hour. Today, I'm writing this column on a computer, which transfers the file to a phototypesetter that converts bits and bytes to readable copy (I trust) in seconds.

Since photographic negatives were cheaper, more maneuverable and easier to use than heavy trays of lead type, newspapers using offset technology could join together to set type and print in cooperative plants. The cost savings were considerable.

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Moreover, because photographic typesetting was so much faster and cost-efficient than hot type methods, home town newspapers like this one could localize their coverage economically, focusing on one community at a time without having to jumble local news from several different towns into a big regional newspaper like the metropolitan daily newspapers still do.

So the community newspapers, arguably the most innovative and entrepreneurial part of the newspaper industry, really got their start as a result of Staley T. McBrayer's innovative genius way back in the mid 1950s. Like many of my publisher colleagues, I adopted phototypesetting and offset printing in my newspapers in the late 1960s.

I never met Staley T. McBrayer; indeed, I had never heard of him before I read his obituary in The New York Times. But I owe him a great debt of gratitude. And so do countless readers whose lives are enhanced by reading their own hometown newspaper like this one.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.



Joni Hubred

On departures, good deeds and downtown

A few random thoughts from inside the scattered mind of an editor returning from a week's vacation:

■ How and to see the Longacre House's interim director Terry Delchert is leaving — but very understandable, given the superhuman effort she's put into keeping that place alive. Delchert invested thousands of her own dollars and we'd hate to count how many hours into organizing last week's "Some Enchanting Evening" fund-raiser. Terry's a terrific lady with a heart of gold, immeasurably dedicated and kind.

She'll also leave some pretty big shoes to fill. We hope people from the community step up to the challenge, or it won't be long before city officials will be looking at what to do with this historic treasure.

■ A downtown business person called me this week to talk about the Farmington Road construction project with the hope that people understand business owners are truly invested in what's going on. Certainly, nobody enjoys construction season, but everyone — even those for whom it is a direct and difficult economic hardship — understand it's a necessary evil.

Farmington's downtown business district is an eclectic entrepreneurial mix; you can find everything from a terrific cup of coffee to books, memorabilia and music, from greeting cards to clothing, bagels and baskets. If you haven't discovered downtown Farmington, take a walk around. Yes, you'll have to dodge a few construction cones, but I can say with absolute certainty that it's a LOT easier to cross Farmington Road now.

Well, on foot, anyway. ■ It's always fun to share stories from the "Pay It Forward" files, submitted by the Commission on Children, Youth and Families. We plan to keep forms in our office — or you're welcome to submit stories via e-mail or on our voice mail after hours.

Here are the latest gems: "While living at Independence Green Apartments many years ago, a kind person would clean my windshield of ice and snow before I left for work in the morning. This person was always gone by the time I went to my car. To this day,

their identity is unknown. I had never known such kindness. This was done without wanting or asking anything in return. Thank you to this unknown person. You and your kindness will never be forgotten."

"Life can be pretty bland when you can't eat any sugar or sugar substitute products. I am used to it for the most part, but once in a while, I really crave something 'good.' Last week, my husband told me he would be bringing me home something special. My mind wandered to diamonds or maybe a blender I wanted. He came home with a white bakery box. Inside was a specially made pie, just for me. No sugar. No sugar substitutes. The best peach pie I've ever had! Maybe because his kind gesture was in each bite. It was a reminder to me that kindness really starts at home, with the ones we live with."

"I work for a charitable organization in Farmington Hills. Last week, I took minutes for a council that meets once a month. I spent two days on and off working on minutes from my shorthand notes. Just before I was to print off my hard work, I accidentally deleted the whole entire project from my computer. After recovering from the shock of what I had done, I was determined to redo the minutes from my original notes, only to remember I had thrown them in the garbage. Our janitor offered to help me find my 'chicken scratch' looking notes. The hunt began with our janitor jumping into the Dumpster in the parking lot, which had just been emptied the day before — thank goodness. One by one, he looked at every piece of paper in the trash until he found notes with writing that looked like nothing he had ever seen before. He searched and searched until he came up with all five pages of shorthand notes. I was so relieved that the notes were found, but I was also humbled by the fact that someone would go to such an extreme to help me. I jokingly told our janitor that my husband and children have often jumped through hoops for me, but no one had ever 'jumped into a Dumpster' before!"

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments at 33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335; by fax, (248) 477-9722; or email, jhubred@oe.homecomm.net

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