Small-Town Newspapers: Iowa Communities in Print

Jay Black

Almost all Iowans, it seems, have access to national and international news via the TV set. But what about the goings-on right in their back yards — in their neighborhood, small town, local school, or city council? Small-town newspapers fill this important gap in information for thousands of Iowans living in rural areas. The local newspaper is their neighborhood in print, and it chronicles the life and history of their community.

Newspapers are often the oldest businesses in town, and ownership can span more than a decade, even several generations. Of Iowa’s 340 newspapers, 299 are small-town weeklies. A good example is the Enterprise Journal in St. Ansgar, a town of 1,100 people in north-central Iowa. It was started in 1878 and is still going strong.

For people in St. Ansgar, “The E.J.” is such a part of their lives, family, and sense of place that they think of it as their newspaper. “There is not another business in town [in which] people feel they have the right to tell the employees how to run their company,” said a staff member. “The people around here feel they have a stake in this newspaper — that they own part of it. Our paper helps define our community and reflects what we do and how we live.”

Like no other business, small-town newspapers give a community a sense of place and continuity.

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Shopping malls, Kmart's, and then Wal-Marts lured away more customers from the small-town stores. And the declining farm population, the predictable result of a century of labor-saving farm machinery, continued the erosion. The farm crisis of the 1980s took a heavy toll on the towns that depended upon the farm economy. From 1983 to 1993, Iowa towns with fewer than 2,000 people lost 2,500 businesses.

Yet, while they may think of themselves often as having been under a long siege, small-town residents continue their fierce home-town loyalty. The younger generations may leave for college and seek their fortunes elsewhere, but high school reunions, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals still draw them home.

Two factors make critical contributions to the unique culture of the small town. For one thing, residents relate to one another in many different ways. They may have been classmates and teammates. They may worship together on Sunday morning. They share a continuous sidewalk. Their children date. They vote on the same local bond issues. They shop at the same stores. They know each other's parents. They pay taxes to the same school district. They see each other at the local café. They depend upon each other for the upkeep of city parks, the swimming pool, the storm sewers, and the cemetery. They save and borrow at the same bank. They all benefit when a repairman knows his business. They belong to the same service clubs and fraternal organizations. They are friends and neighbors. Small towns fold layers and layers of relationships back upon each other.

They also share the same stories; there is a collective memory. Newcomers remain outsiders until they understand the local nuances in the story about the boys who chained the police car to the popcorn stand or whether it was good offense or good defense that put the 1956 girls' basketball team into the finals of the state tournament. Why did Mrs. Kitchell not leave her house for the last seven years of her life? Each town has its own mythology, and those who know it carry their citizenship with them wherever they go.

A second factor that strengthens the local ties of small-town residents is the realization, at some level of consciousness, that their own welfare is ultimately tied up with everyone else's. The town represents a miniature cosmos. No matter how much an individual prospers, he or she has no better fire protection than can be provided by the local force, a fire department that in most cases depends upon volunteers. No matter how well your daughter plays the clarinet, the band is the product of the community. And if you want her band to look good, you'll sign up when the band parents need volunteers to serve the pancake suppers that raise the money for uniforms.

And while enlightened self-interest, not altruism, may well motivate the incredible volunteer efforts that sustain small-town life, the result is often a proprietary attitude toward the community: this is "my" town because I have helped to make it what it is.

The word politics comes from the Greek polis, or "city-state." Politics was about life in the polis, the opportunity to be seen and heard by fellow citizens and to play a part in public life. For ancient Athenians or Spartans, life outside of their polis hardly qualified as human. Modern Iowa small-town residents might not go that far, but they understand the sentiment.

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