

Their weekly was beacon in darkness

Sometimes, we who are in the business of editing and publishing community newspapers, whether they be weeklies or small dailies, suffer from a professional inferiority complex.

We compare our lot — enviously — with that of colleagues toiling on medium-sized and large metropolitan daily newspapers. And we tell ourselves that if only we had their resources — a corps of seasoned reporters, editors and photographers plus large mechanical, circulation and advertising departments — investigative journalism would not only be possible, it would be expected by readers who sometimes feel crushed by unresponsive institutions.

We point to the Washington Post's courageous work in unearthing the Watergate scandal, which won that newspaper nationwide praise and resulted in books and a movie portraying reporters as heroes.

THOSE EVENTS of the last decade also served to emphasize the feeling that big newspapers are capable of tackling corruption and the abuse of power. But there is a lingering worry that we small fry in Frankenmuth and elsewhere would be devoured by the sharks if we tried swimming in the same pool.

A premise exactly opposite the preceding remarks is contained in a book I read recently. "The Light on Synanon" is subtitled, "How a country weekly exposed a corporate cult — and won the Pulitzer Prize."

A newspapering couple in their 30s, David and Cathy Mitchell, wrote the book in collaboration with a University of California professor. The Mitchells were — and still are, to my knowledge — publishers of The Point Reyes Light, a Northern California weekly whose circulation is perhaps half that of The Frankenmuth News.

The Mitchells could have been but weren't timid as they dug up the facts on Synanon, the formerly well-thought-of alcohol and drug rehabilitation organization. Its officials, however, had increasingly turned to violence against members and harassment of non-members while accumulating large profits — despite the group's tax-exempt status.

SEVERAL SYNANON members, it should be recalled, were responsible for placing a rattlesnake in the mailbox of a Los Angeles lawyer several years ago. Struck by the snake when he opened the mailbox, the lawyer survived. And just last summer, Synanon founder Charles Dederich and two other Synanon officials pled no contest to conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the incident.

That was the most publicized episode involving Synanon. Through other incidents, it gradually assumed the role of an unpleasant — even dangerous — neighbor to other residents of Marin County, home turf for the Mitchells and The Light.

The Mitchells, in a book well worth reading by persons outside journalism, detail how they began reporting, reluctantly at first, on an organization whose wealth, lawyers and other resources dwarfed the newspaper's.

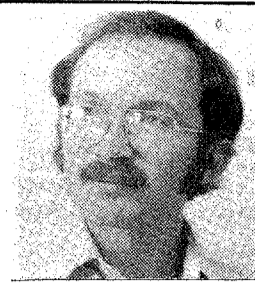
It had all the makings of a David-and-Goliath struggle. Except, if Synanon had turned on The Light, the outcome might well have been unlike the Biblical one. One gets the impression from reading this book that Synanon could have squashed the newspaper.

FORTUNATELY, THE Mitchells speculate, Synanon

Editor's

Outlook

Dennis Gaub



was so busy suing a television station and newspaper in San Francisco plus Time magazine (\$76 million sought, but not awarded, from that publication alone) for revelations they had made. Consequently, Synanon never really turned its attention to the newspaper at its back door until it was too late — state and local law enforcement agencies, finally displaying some courage, began following up on grand jury findings.

The Light may have seemed like a buzzing fly, more an irritant than a real threat, to Synanon. But that perception was erroneous. The newspaper published nearly 200 articles and editorials on Synanon and has received considerable credit for checking the organization's wrong-doing, if not stopping it entirely.

For their efforts, the Mitchells won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Meritorious Public Service. The Light was only the fourth weekly to win a Pulitzer in the 64 years since the prestigious honor was instituted.

Considerable media attention focused on the Mitchells two years ago when they won the prize. They

appeared on national television programs and had reporters from the New York Times, Newsweek and Time calling them.

WORKING ON A SMALL daily at the time, I remember being thrilled at the recognition given reporters whose working conditions were not that much different from mine. "The Light on Synanon" revived that thrill.

The Mitchells are an inspiration, probably more so than Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame, to those of us working on small community newspapers. I'm left with a feeling that weekly newspapers, such as this one, could, should and would investigate organizations which stray from their stated aims into abuses of power and profit. Informing our readers of such errancy and prodding the proper authorities, if necessary, to take corrective measures is also our responsibility.

We are fortunate that our community presently is home to no cults such as Synanon. But if a similar cult were to take up residence here, and perpetrate abuses such as the Mitchells discovered in their community, this newspaper would be compelled to act.

Letters. . . with YOUR opinion

Displaced family says, 'Thanks'

EDITOR: The James Moll family wishes to thank their family, friends and neighbors for the moral support and words of kindness and encouragement given them during their recent loss. Also to all the people of the community who gave so generously of their time, money and household goods.

We want to thank Immanuel Lutheran Church for their generous gift of money. And the many individual members who showed us much love and great concern for our welfare.

We also want to thank the Blumfield, Reese and Frankenmuth Fire departments for their great effort to save our home.

We may have lost material things, but indeed we found that the true spirit of Christmas is very much alive in our community. And knowing such kindness, we have found the most important thing anyone can have beside his faith in God is his friends and neighbors.

James and Sandra Moll and Family

Film provided epilepsy insight

EDITOR: The Saginaw Valley Epilepsy Association would like to publicly thank Lutheran Television the Lutheran Laymen's League, Mr Darryl Heine of that organization, and the many sponsors who gave so generously to bring the film "Miles to Go (a story about a young collegiate swimmer with epilepsy) to this area. Channel 12 TV is also to be commended for showing this fine public service film which we are sure did much to further better understanding of this disorder.

We also thank your newspaper for the fine articles on epilepsy you have printed in the past, and we are grateful for your announcing the times of our meetings and our guests each month.

Sally Meyette, President
Saginaw Valley Epilepsy Association
Sanford, Mich.

SPORTS 'n OTHER STUFF
by A. Nonymous

Last Weekend's hunting and fishing was zilch. The weather was not fit for man nor beast.

The fox hunters are up to five fox and are sending out a plea for fox. If you see a fox running in the daytime they would appreciate the information.

Bird feeders--Our friend, the hawk, has taken up residence in the city and makes his rounds to the feeding stations. It's illegal to shoot him plus he is more of a rarity in town than most other birds.

People feeding the gold finch say they are not as numerous as last year, but remember there are about three times as many feeders in town as last year. Finch feeders are a popular item with the bird lovers.

Note to Don Keller at Bavarian Inn.

Change your Monday telephone recorded message. According to your information you are still having your employees Christmas party on Mondays.

Frank Rittmueller, the banker, goes to the doctor for a physical and checkup. The doc says, "Frank you are sound as a dollar". Frank faints.

Did you know that thirty-three percent of the nation's work force is employed by the Fed. gov't? That's one out of three people.

Gov't Spending-- \$378,000—to a consultant to find out why the agency was hiring so many consultants.

\$90,000—to determine the behavior of vegetarians.

Herman the German knew a woman so thin that she bought a striped bathing suit and it had only one stripe.

Did you know that our Federal Department of Energy is running public service radio spots urging Americans not to buy American made gas guzzlers.

Herman the German said, "My wife was in the beauty parlor for two hours; that was just for the estimate."

With all the building renovators and second floor additions going on we hope the builders consulted with the historical preservation committee first.

Wonder if Pastor Ehler brought any pictures home of the hula-hula girls in Hawaii for the Men's Club special program?

To Harry & Barb Worden: You wouldn't be thanking anyone for socializing in your parking lot if you lived behind your store. From spring to fall your lot sounds like a race track. Loud music from car radios, the throwing of cans, loud laughter, fowl language, and squealing tires make it impossible to sleep. Talking to the police is a waste of time, we've tried. Calling the police results in no action as your lot is not posted and you allow this congregating to go on.

To Harry & Barb Worden: You wouldn't think your lot is so orderly if you lived behind your store as we do, especially during the summer time. Loud stereo, cans and bottles being thrown about, and squealing tires to keep you up all night. I'd gladly live in your house and let you live behind your store.

Moral of the "tree story". If you find under-age kids illegally drinking beer under your tree, it is ok to cut down the guilty tree.

By the way, did Zehnder's get an ok from the historical commission to cut down these lovely old trees?

The first representative assembly in America convened at Jamestown, Virginia, July 30, 1619.

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