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Newspapers faded away as the amalgamation disease hit

By Rod Kirkpatrick

Some Australian towns capture your imagination as you enter them and persuade you to stop and wander their streets. They declare their individuality, but so often their stories declare their typicality. *Their* story – especially when it comes to newspapers – is the story of many another town.

Laura (South Australia) and Minyip (Victoria) belong to this category. Both have long been on Australia's extensive list of newspaper ghost towns, Laura for 55 years and Minyip for 42, yet the offices formerly occupied by the *Laura Standard* and the *Minyip Guardian* still stand and still bear the old newspaper titles proudly. At Laura, the old newspaper office is now a crafts shop; at Minyip, it is the headquarters of the local historical society.

Laura

Laura's one and only newspaper, the *Laura Standard and Beetaloo, Wirrabara, Melrose, Booleroo Centre, and Yarrowie Advertiser*, began publication on April 11, 1889, although several attempts had been made to launch a newspaper in earlier years. The static nature of the population had discouraged the potential printers, as had the fact that wheat was virtually the only local farming activity.

A limited liability company, chaired by Israel Taylor, was formed at the end of 1888 to open a printing office at Laura and to begin preparing to publish a newspaper. The company planned to launch the paper on April 4, 1889, but did not appear until a week later because of "the negligence of a Melbourne firm from whom we purchased our machinery", as manager Louis Simon put it.

The introductory editorial could have been copied from, or copied by, many another Australian newspaper beginning an uncertain life in a town far removed from a big population centre. "For some years past," the *Standard* said, "the inhabitants of Laura and surrounding districts have felt the need of a paper which should be devoted to the ventilating of local wants and aspirations."

The *Standard* said the burning questions of the day for South Australia were water conservation and irrigation. Some of the local soil was poor, but some was "admirably adapted to the growth of vines, fruit and vegetables; and for richness and fertility [was] unsurpassed by any land in the colony".

The *Laura Standard* had been initiated to boost the district and give it a much greater chance of achieving prosperity. "It is our intention to bring prominently before the public the immense capabilities of this naturally favoured district," the *Standard* said. "We must not be discouraged if at first our efforts are not crowned with success."

The first printer's devil on the *Standard*, I. B. Stevens, who rolled the formes for the first issue as well as selling it on the streets, recalled 54 years later that the paper struggled at first. The early circulation was 280. The initial company controlled the paper for less than six months before William Symons and John Harman bought it.

They sold on May 20, 1892, to William James Cooper Cole, a former Kapunda Herald apprentice who entered politics as the Member for Stanley, and later Port Pirie, in the House of Assembly. His parliamentary duties prompted him to sell to a former employee, Edward John Farrell, on October 20, 1910. Farrell sold to Reuben Ames Rose on August 22, 1913, and he operated the paper for 29 years until his death, editorialising frequently on the importance of bushfire prevention. He wrote many articles about the history of the district.

Laura, on the Rocky River and on the eastern slopes of the Flinders Ranges, held a special place in the heart of the poet C.J. Dennis, who lived there for many years. His father was a publican. Dennis's first poem was published in the *Laura Standard* in 1895 when he was 19. When Laura celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1932, Dennis honoured the occasion with a poem, "Laura Days", which concludes:

When the evening sun slants through the gums
By my forest-rimmed abode,
Once more the old clear picture comes,
And my mind drifts down the road;
Back to the town by Beetaloo,
Where the Rocky River strays;
Back to the old kind friends I knew
In the dear old Laura days.

The *Laura Standard* incorporated the *Crystal Brook Courier* from August 3, 1917. Its circulation was much wider by the 1940s than 50 years earlier. A 1941 copy said it was circulating "through Laura, Apila, Stone Hut, Wirrabara, Murraytown, Booleroo Centre, Bangor, Melrose, Wilmington, Crystal Brook, Huddleston, Narridy, Rocky River, Wandearah, Telowie, Port Germain and Baroota".

Three months before what would have been its sixtieth anniversary, the *Standard* was afflicted with the disease that painlessly killed so many country newspapers: amalgamation. If L.M.W. Judell, owner of the *Agriculturist and Review*, Jamestown, had had his way, this would have occurred more than 20 years earlier. After some years' experience with the State and national provincial press associations, Judell said it had become evident to him that small country newspapers must embrace larger areas and populations in order to become progressive and viable centres.

Convinced of that, in 1927 he promoted a co-operative company to acquire and amalgamate the newspaper and printing businesses at Jamestown, Gladstone, Laura and Orroroo. Until October 1927 the project seemed likely to succeed. "Then," wrote Judell, "the impact of the dreadful 'Depression of the Thirties' affected this region and made such a design impossible; it had to be abandoned or postponed in some form."

Over the next few years he bought the *Areas Express* newspaper and printing businesses from William Hancock, and, on November 6, 1942, the *Laura Standard and Crystal Brook Courier* from the estate of Reuben James Rose. "Neither of these businesses had the possibility of progressing singly owing to the limitations of their environment," Judell said. "For a few years these papers were printed and published individually at Jamestown. Then in January 1949 they were merged with the *Agriculturist and Review* into one publication, the *Northern Review*, which had a reasonably good and growing circulation."

More incorporations lay ahead for the *Review*, reflecting the uncertain existence that SA country weeklies experienced. On April 2, 1970, the *Northern Review*, the *Peterborough Times* and the *Orroroo Enterprise* amalgamated to form the *Review-Times*. Proprietors J.S. Bennett and R.K. Warnest said, "The amalgamation of these three newspapers into one publication for the Northern Areas of the State was a logical step in a process of rationalisation made necessary by changes in the area and in the industry."

The coming of web offset presses and the outdated nature of the production facilities at Jamestown and Peterborough led the owners of the *Review-Times* to get their paper produced by the *Transcontinental* at Port Augusta and the *Recorder* at Port Pirie. They were not always happy with the result and they faced pressure to join an amalgamation of the *Transcontinental* and the *Recorder*. The amalgamated title, the *Northern Observer*, appeared in July and August 1971, but the people of Port Pirie and Port Augusta did not support it, and the old titles re-appeared.

Instead of joining the *Observer*, the *Review-Times* entered into negotiations with Independent Newspapers Pty Ltd., publishers of the *Flinders News* and the *Port Pirie Star*. The *Star* was launched on July 23, 1971, to fill the gap left by the absence at that time of a clearly identifiable Port Pirie paper.

At Jamestown and Peterborough, Bennett and Warnest regarded the continuation of a local newspaper as “of utmost importance to the areas on which they depended for a livelihood for so long and to which they owed a loyalty”. Independent Newspapers gave an assurance that they were prepared to retain the *Review-Times* as a purely local newspaper.

The Willson family, owners of the *Whyalla News*, bought the Port Pirie *Recorder*, but were rebuffed when they expressed an interest in buying the publishing rights of the *Review-Times*. On Friday, October 15, 1971, the new proprietors of the *Recorder* began delivering it free in the Jamestown area and informed the *Review-Times* that it could no longer have the paper printed at the *Recorder* printery.

At short notice, Independent Newspapers Pty Ltd agreed to exercise their option to buy the *Review-Times*. J.S. and H.S. Bennett continued to operate The Times Ltd, Peterborough, as a printing establishment, and Len and Rodney Muller, owners of Crystal Press at Crystal Brook, took over the Northern Review printery at Jamestown from R.K. and E. Warnest a few weeks later.

On March 17, 1977, the *Review-Times* incorporated the *Burra Record* and became the *Review-Times-Record*, which was published until August 31, 1989. The death of this title obscured the death of so many other titles it had incorporated, including the *Laura Standard*, 1889-1948. The “dear old Laura days” had long gone for *Standard* readers.

Minyip

When I drove into Laura at the end of a long day on the road, I had no inkling of the town’s newspaper history, but when I entered the Wimmera town of Minyip in December 2001 at the beginning of a day during which I interviewed editors at Donald, St Arnaud and Bendigo, I knew something about Minyip. I knew that locals had responded to the closure of banks in the district by starting their own in 1998 – the Rupanyup-Minyip Community Bank Branch of the Bendigo Bank. [It is still going strong.]

And I knew that on August 1, 1885, Henry Dunstan (1862-1914), later the owner of the *Wagga Wagga Express*, had established the *Minyip Guardian and Sheep Hills Advocate* bringing “momentous change” to the North Riding of the Dunmunkle Shire. To the south, at Rupanyup a *Chronicle* had been established in 1880, but had survived only a year or so, and to the south-west, Murtoa had the *Dunmunkle Standard*, established on December 6, 1878.

Dunstan had joined the *Horsham Times* as a 19-year-old reporter in 1881 and quickly became the editor before becoming the manager and editor of the rival paper, the *Wimmera Star*, in 1883. A month after he opened the *Minyip Guardian* he started the *Rupanyup Spectator*.

In the two papers Dunstan promoted any development which he saw as being good for the community. Despite becoming active in all aspects of the community and editorialising strongly on its behalf, Dunstan sold the *Guardian* in September 1888 and became the editor of the *Charlton Independent* for two years. In 1890 he started the *Yackandandah Times* in north-eastern Victoria and in 1906 he won, by a day, a race to grasp the £100 (\$200) offered to start a paper across the border at Urana. He bought the *Wagga Wagga Express* in 1913 and died a year later, but the Dunstan family published the *Express* daily from 1919-1930 and closed it in 1939.

At Minyip, from 1889 until 1914, John D. Heckle was an energetic proprietor and editor of the *Guardian*. Long before ecumenism, he applauded any effort by local churches to “come together” in their common need, such as the Church of England opening its doors to a Presbyterian congregation. On February 16, 1889, he argued in an editorial, “The Right to Franchise”, that women were not of inferior intellect, concluding that “we may well have, in years to come, a lady premier, a lady governor, etc.”

From 1914 Heckle leased the *Guardian* to one of his stepsons, Leslie Heathershaw Glasson, but sold it in 1918 to Henry William Foster (1875-1957), who learned the printing trade – and shorthand – at the *Ararat Advertiser*. He also worked on papers at Nhill, Horsham and Stawell before running the *Minyip Guardian* for 16 years. Foster installed a Double Royal Wharfedale flat bed press and in 1919, when electricity came to Minyip, he installed an

electric motor to run it. The business also had an Arab Platen, that was hand fed and foot treadled, for job printing.

Foster sold the paper in March 1934 to James Bertram Henstridge, 56, who had spent a lifetime in newspapers. At the nine, Henstridge began working on the *Nhill and Tatiara Mail* and at 18 he was working on the *Adelaide Register*.

Later he worked for the Specialty Press, the Salvation Army printing works, the Melbourne *Argus* (where he was head proof reader) and the *Wimmera Star* before buying the *Dimboola Banner* in 1922 and forcing the *Dimboola Chronicle* out of business seven years later. He still owned the *Banner* in 1934 when he bought the *Minyip Guardian*, which was still hand set. In the Henstridge era, the type was set on Linotypes at Dimboola and from 1944 the printing was also done at Dimboola. Henstridge installed his son, John Frederick (Jack), as editor and manager of the *Minyip Guardian*.

J.B. Henstridge died in 1959, aged 81, and less than a year later his son, Jack, died. The *Guardian* continued to be printed at Dimboola under the editorship of Keith Curtis Jones, but only until December 19, 1962, when it ceased publication. Arrangements had been made for Minyip news to be published in Murtoa's *Dunmunkle Standard*, the only surviving newspaper in the Dunmunkle Shire.

Keith Slattery had revived the *Standard* in 1961 after it had not been published for two years following the death of proprietor James T. Mackay. Slattery passed on the *Standard* to son, Jack, in the late 1960s and he published it until February 26, 1974, ending Minyip's last link with what the locals could call a local publication. Jack Slattery ran the Dunmunkle Printery until July 1996 and has since worked at the *Buloke Times*, Donald, for the Letts family.

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