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Murray Bridge took its time to cross publishing barriers

By Rod Kirkpatrick

With the roll call of Australian newspapers that have reached their 150th birthday growing almost by the month – four have attained that milestone since last May – it is fascinating to find that a significant printing centre such as Murray Bridge in South Australia has had a newspaper for only 70 years.

Murray Bridge, on the lower reaches of the Murray River, has had various names over the years: Coninka, Edward's Crossing, The Turnoff, and Mobilong. Murray Bridge was not gazetted until 1940, but the town was part of Mobilong District Council from 1884 and the town area became a Corporation in 1924, with the outlying areas remaining in the Mobilong council. The name was chosen because the first bridge over the Murray was completed there in 1879. Incidentally, the current bridge, the 734-metre-long Swanport Bridge, was completed precisely 100 years later.

Until 1934, Murray Bridge people had to rely on outside newspapers for news of their significant little town. The earliest newspaper in the wider district was the *Southern Argus*, launched at Port Elliott on March 17, 1866, and published at Strathalbyn since 1868.

More significantly, the *Mount Barker Courier* was established on October 1, 1880, by Charles Morris Russell Dumas. Its coverage of Murray Bridge varied until 1909 when Dumas announced in February that he was going to establish an up-to-date printing and publishing office in Murray Bridge before the end of the month. The *Courier* began presenting a "Murray Bridge News" section, a widened its scope a little from July 16 that year by labelling it "Murray Bridge and River News".

The *Courier* had planned to establish, it seems, a stand-alone newspaper, but instead added a *River Murray Advocate* sub-title to the *Courier* from August 13, 1909. Murray Bridge newspaper historian Harold McLaren, upon whose meticulous research much of this article is based, believes that when the paper was sold in the Murray Bridge district, the back page, carrying a bold *River Murray Advocate* banner (from May 12, 1916), was presented as the front page.

From mid-1933 the *Murray Bridge Advertiser* came into play in the sub-titles used by the *Mount Barker Courier*. There does not appear to have been a separate newspaper under this title, although from June 9, 1933, the *Courier* added to its *River Murray Advocate* sub-title the words *Incorporating the Murray Bridge Advertiser*. From July 21, 1933, the *Advertiser* sub-title took precedence over the *Advocate*.

It may be that the *Courier* could see that it was inevitable that there would soon be a separate newspaper in Murray Bridge and it was ensuring that the *Courier* itself could use that title if Dumas finally realised his aim to launch a Murray Bridge paper.

On November 2, 1934, the *Courier* addressed Murray Bridge readers in an editorial under a *Murray Bridge Advertiser* masthead: "The new form in which this paper appears today represents the first step towards the production of a separate newspaper for Murray Bridge and the important River Districts through which the *Murray Bridge Advertiser* and the *Mount Barker Courier* circulates. Ever since a branch office was opened in Murray Bridge, it has been the ambition of the proprietor to publish a paper for the district."

Dumas said plans had been in hand when the Great depression hit. Now that the nation was emerging from the depression, the plans were being revived.

Three weeks later, apparently to the surprise of Dumas, Maurice W. Parish (1890-1980), a former mayor of Murray Bridge and a former state parliamentarian, launched the *Murray Valley Standard*. Parish believed that Murray Bridge could support its own

newspaper, with some help from Mannum and Tailem Bend. In 1933 he had bought a small printing office opened as a one-man show by Arnold Cuthbert (Bert) Lawrie in 1931.

Parish extended the building to provide for the establishment of the *Murray Valley Standard* and the Bridge printing Office. He was chairman of the Mobilong District Council, 1917-24, and the mayor of the new Corporation of Murray Bridge, 1924-27, and again from 1931-33. He launched the *Standard* on November 23, 1934, with Frank Wyly Hambidge (1910-78) as editor and Bert Lawrie as printer.

The first edition (400 copies) was printed on a Wharfedale flat bed double royal press manufactured by Payne and Sons, Otley, England, in the 1920s. Apparently the press had been used in the *Register News Pictorial* office in Adelaide. The *Register* ceased publication on February 20, 1931, and was incorporated in the *Advertiser*. The Wharfedale was used at Murray Bridge until November 1955 when it was sold to the *Pinnaroo and Border Times*.

Four weeks after the *Standard's* first appearance, Dumas sold the plant and goodwill of the *Murray Bridge Advertiser* and the *Mannum Mercury* to Parish. The Mannum title, launched as a separate publication on March 30, 1912, had been part of the *Mount Barker Courier* since July 20, 1917.

Hambidge, 24, who had worked at the *South Eastern Times*, Millicent, and the *South Eastern Star*, Mount Gambier, edited the weekly paper until the end of 1941 when he joined the armed services. After four years of war service, he worked for the daily *Advocate*, Burnie, for five years.

One of the *Standard's* first employees was a 17-year-old from Tailem Bend, Tom Farrell, who went on to become assistant general manager of John Fairfax and Sons, Sydney. For years Farrell kept his copy of the first issue of the *Standard*, autographed by all those present during the print run.

When Frank Hambidge left the *Murray Valley Standard*, foreman printer Clarence Charles Cooke took on the extra duties of editing. He wrote a popular column of whimsy called "Mingling with the Multitude" under the Byline "The Stroller". Its popularity was reminiscent of that enjoyed by George Westacott's "Topics" column at Rockhampton in the *Evening News* and later the *Morning Bulletin*.

Parish sold the *Standard* and Bridge Printing Office to Hambidge and his wife, Doris, in October 1950, despite having promised senior staff that he would give them first option of purchase. Instead they were not informed of the impending sale and also missed out on a bonus Parish had promised them. Cooke, who was mayor of Murray Bridge from 1943-51 and chairman of Woodville District Council before he shifted to Murray Bridge, resigned from the *Standard*. He died in 1955, aged 59.

Hambidge resumed the editorial reins in 1950 and continued to hold them until April 1967 when he handed them to son-in-law Raymond Allen Wells, who had been a sub-editor on the *News*, Adelaide, for four years, after working on the *Barrier Miner*, Broken Hill, and the *Border Watch*, Mount Gambier.

Hambidge took a back seat, becoming governing director until about 1971, while his son, Michael, became the managing director, although he continued as advertising manager and pictorial editor.

Current production manager Adrian Dibben, a printer at Murray Bridge for 35 years, recalls Frank Hambidge as someone who drew out the best in everybody. "You would print bricks for him."

A fully automatic Heidelberg cylinder press replaced the Wharfedale at the *Standard* in 1955 and in 1967 an 11-ton Swiss-built Buhler Duplex, formerly used by the recently closed *Mount Isa Mail*, was installed. It was a disaster, producing poorly printed pages and being the source of numerous other problems.

From May 29, 1969, the *Standard* became the first SA country paper to be printed offset, but not on its own press. The printers were Smedley Press, in the Adelaide suburb of Glenelg.

A local partnership launched a free weekly, the *Bridge Observer*, on August 19, 1971, printed by Messenger, and from January 1973 the *Standard* appeared twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday) in an unsuccessful effort to oust its rival. Printing of the *Standard* returned to

Murray Bridge, firstly on to a Solnar Perfector press (for a few editions) and then a two-unit Goss Community press. Two more units were added before the end of 1973. In November 1973, the *Standard* reverted to weekly issue.

From July 9, 1974, until the *Bridge Observer* closed on September 7, 1976, it was printed by the Bridge Printing Office, becoming a *de facto* Tuesday edition of the *Standard*. The *Observer* announced, a little ambiguously: "There has been no change in ownership of either publication or company, but overall management of both newspapers is now the contract responsibility of Bridge Printing Office."

The *Standard* became a bi-weekly again on October 20, 1981, when it was thought another rival newspaper might begin publication.

In April 1973 editor Wells left after six years to join the *Sunday Mail*, Adelaide, as a feature writer. It is surmised that his wife, a Hambidge, had sold her interest in the paper. Michael Hambidge became managing editor. In March 1983 Hambidge initiated the practice of adding his name and photograph to the "Viewpoint" (editorial) column. "No longer is it fashionable," he wrote, "to express opinions from the shelter of 'pen names' or even the Editorial 'we'." The bylined editorials ceased when Rural Press bought the paper in 1988. From the mid-1990s no editorial was published.

In the mid 1970s Michael and Dorothy Hambidge sold 49 per cent of the Bridge Printing Office to Messenger Press, Adelaide. Six years later, when the Adelaide *Advertiser* was bidding for Messenger, Hambidge borrowed money to buy back the Messenger interest in the Bridge Printing Office.

Michael Hambidge was an enthusiastic, impulsive manager – a "a bull-at-a-gate person, a go-getter", one employee says – and he changed the masthead of the newspaper several times in the early 1980s.

In mid 1984 Hambidge relocated the Bridge Printing Office from the purpose-built premises that his father had had constructed in the town in 1970 to a ramshackle former factory building with a multitude of different floor levels, located out of the central business area on the northern outskirts of the town adjacent to the Mannum Road railway crossing. Extensive modifications were needed before it was suitable to be used as a printing office.

In 1986 Rural Press Ltd bought a one-third interest in Bridge Printing Office because it had bought the SA rural weekly, the *Stock Journal*, in mid 1985. It handed over the pre-press and printing contract for the *Stock Journal* to Bridge Printing. In July 1988 Rural Press bought the remaining two-thirds interest in Bridge, as part of its policy of owning a printing office near the capital city in each state where it had a rural weekly.

Michael Hambidge concluded a 15-year editorship of the *Standard* when he sold the paper to Rural Press. He had built Bridge printing into a substantial contract printing works, producing 40 publications, including newspapers for publishers as far away as Victor Harbor, south of Adelaide.

Hambidge moved to Adelaide to become a partner in Formgraphics, a typesetting firm, where he developed their bureau service for Apple and IBM PC work on the Linotronic 300. Then he did consultancy work for newspapers in Victoria, NSW and Tasmania as they introduced computer typesetting. He retired to Launceston and is believed to have recently moved to Mildura.

Hambidge family members had edited the *Standard* for 45 of its 54 years when Mike Hambidge left: Frank, 1934-41 and 1950-67; Ray Wells, 1967-73; and Mike, 1973-88. Since then the editors have been Terence Ross Wilksch (1988-94), Graham Donald Rich (1995-2003), Jane Boessen Kempe (2003, six months), and Travis Nathan Simmons (2003-now).

Fire swept through the Bridge Printing Office on Friday night, November 16, 1990, causing damage estimated at \$1 million to the administration, editorial and advertising sections of the building. Firemen managed to save the printing department and the newsprint storage sections. Files of the *Standard* dating back to the first issue were saved. Months later, police and insurance assessors concluded the fire was "deliberately lit by persons unknown". Rural Press rebuilt on site and the new building was opened on January 31, 1992.

Beryl Price, a qualified accountant, became the manager in March 1994, and in 1997 became involved in an issue that ended up in the High Court.

Rural Press Ltd was accused of threatening to introduce a competing newspaper against the *River News*, Waikerie, unless that paper ceased circulating in Mannum, a town which had traditionally been part of the *Murray Valley Standard's* circulation area.

The tradition had broken down when local-government boundary changes led to Mannum's becoming part of the council whose district had been served by the *River News*.

Managing editor John Pick decided he wanted to cover all of the newly enlarged council area, so he employed a correspondent, Duncan Emmins, in Mannum, and began marketing the *River News* there in 1997. He added an estimated 180 copies to his circulation of about 2,000-2,500.

When the *River News* withdrew to 30km north of Mannum, the ACCC took action in the Federal Court. Justice Mansfield found that *River News* had not withdrawn for financial reasons, but because of threats of retaliation by Rural Press.

On appeal, the Full Federal Court overruled the judgment that Rural Press had misused its market power. Despite this, the Full Court held that the original penalties ordered were appropriate for RPL's breach of section 45 of the Trade Practices Act. The company was fined \$600,000 and Waikerie Printing was fined \$75,000.

The High Court rejected by a 5-1 majority a Federal Court finding that Rural Press Ltd had misused its market power and breached Section 46 of the Trade Practices Act, but the court rejected an appeal by Rural Press and upheld an earlier Federal Court finding that Rural Press had breached the Trade Practices Act (but not Section 46).

Today Rural Press Printing at Murray Bridge prints more than 60 different publications, including the *Standard* twice a week, and weeklies such as the *Southern Argus*, *Strathalbyn*, the *Victor Harbor Times*, the *Barossa and Light Herald*, Adelaide's new Sunday title, the *Independent Weekly*, the SA edition of the *Trading Post* and Rural Press's SA rural title, *Stock Journal*.

It also prints the daily SA editions of the *Australian Financial Review*. Little wonder it uses 50 to 60 tonnes of paper a week and is the major regionally-based newspaper printer in SA and the Northern Territory.

Rod Kirkpatrick is Program Director, Journalism, at the University of Queensland.