

# **Tangible History: The Value of Commemorative Newspaper Sections**

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**Presented to:**  
119<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the National Newspaper Association  
Sept. 29, 2005

**Co-sponsored by:**  
The Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media  
A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications  
Kansas State University  
The National Newspaper Association Foundation

## **Introduction**

In smaller communities across America, it's a safe bet residents take pride in two things: their newspaper and their town's history.

When a major milestone in a town's history comes along, most notably a centennial, sesquicentennial or bicentennial anniversary, the town's newspaper is right there to cover it. That coverage can take many forms, from a mere front-page article to a full-color photo spread on the back page, to a larger project, such as a special section that marks the town's anniversary and its celebratory events. That special section and its coverage, then, become beloved keepsakes to the townsfolk, many of whom likely will hang onto the newspaper for sentimental reasons or just because they're history buffs.

It seems a disservice to end the newspaper's use there – surely such a lengthy piece, the result of hours, days and weeks of research and work, has a larger, greater use than simply sitting on someone's bookshelf or coffee table, serving as an occasional piece of reading.

This study maintains that there are several benefits to producing these special commemorative sections, and that journalists should not see the production of these sections as a chore or as simply obligatory. These special sections mainly serve three greater purposes:

**•To bring revenue into the town and the newspaper itself through advertising advertising dollars and tourism,**

**•To educate the youth of the community through use of the newspaper in historical societies, museums, and classrooms of all grade levels, and**

**•To foster practical experience and team-building skills throughout the production process.**

These three main benefits should help all involved realize the long-lasting worth of commemorative sections and thereby turn the newspaper into something in which the entire community can take pride.

Although both the long-term and short-term benefits of the production and distribution of commemorative sections seem so obvious, community journalists increasingly see such projects as obligatory, according to Jock Lauterer, professor of communications at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. When he worked at a community newspaper in North Carolina and the time came to produce such a section, the editors and reporters laughingly referred to it as the “Moan and Groan.” To them, the section wasn’t produced because they had any interest in their community. It was produced because ... well ... that’s just the way it was always done.

Upon close examination of the greater values of the commemorative section, which will be presented here, the old “Moan and Groan” just might become a more highly anticipated project.

## **Background**

Riley County, Kansas, and the community of Manhattan, Kan., home to Kansas State University, recognized their sesquicentennial anniversary this year, with celebratory events taking place during the first weekend in June. In the days preceding and during the events, local media covered the celebrations and recounted the history of the town and county through articles, archive photographs and editorials. The city's newspaper, *The Manhattan Mercury*, printed a 64-page special section titled "Manhattan 150: Celebrating 150 Years of Progress." The student-run daily newspaper of K-State, *The Kansas State Collegian*, printed its own 10-page special section, as well as a collaborative section with another area paper, *The Riley Countian*, titled "Riley County Legacy." The section, printed in late April 2005, was the result of months of preparation by local elementary, middle, high school and college students. Elementary, middle and high school and college students researched the county's history and wrote articles on its past and present, while K-State undergraduate and graduate students edited and designed the section. Romelle Van Sickle, outgoing editor of *The Riley Countian*, and Gloria Freeland, assistant professor of journalism and mass communications at K-State, oversaw the project. A *Collegian* photographer took many photos for the section, but most were donated by the Riley County Historical Society. The section made its debut in the *Riley Countian* on April 28 and was inserted into 5,000 copies of the May 2 *Collegian*.

Other local media, such as the weekly *Manhattan Free Press*, did not print special sections because of budget and personnel issues, but instead devoted much of their

regular print space to precedes and coverage of the county and town celebrations.

This case study employs more than a dozen interviews with students, educators, professional journalists and historians in presenting its assertion that commemorative newspaper sections have a greater worth than many realize. These benefits of financial and educational gain should indeed make the entire production process more than worth your time and money.

***Commemorative newspaper sections bring revenue into the town and the newspaper itself through advertising dollars and tourism.***

One of the more tangible benefits of putting together a commemorative section also is one of the most obvious: more ad revenue. In addition to your regular paper, you now have 60 more pages in which to allow businesses to tout themselves and, in turn, supply extra revenue to community newspapers that need it so desperately.

According to Lauterer, who also has written several books on community journalism and is considered by many in his field to be one of the foremost scholars on the topic, the successful advertisements take the same tone as the section in which they appear: they should sell their role in the town itself. These ads, Lauterer says, should be crafted for special sections, offering the history of their business while combining interesting facts about their business that catch the reader's eye.

Lyle Butler, director of the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce, said newspaper editors shouldn't see the commemorative section as something that interests only a few people. Butler said he believes businesses see placing an ad in such a section

as a long-term investment.

“For advertisers, there is a greater benefit,” Butler said. “When they look at buying an ad for that section, they know it’s going to be held onto for a long period of time.”

Ned Seaton, editor in chief of *The Manhattan Mercury*, said his paper’s commemorative section, published May 29, 2005, garnered more ads than he expected. Seaton wouldn’t disclose the exact monetary amount that the ads brought in.

However, it is safe to estimate that the paper came away with several thousand dollars. When *The Marysville Advocate* covered the sesquicentennial anniversary of the town of Marysville, Kan., last year, publisher and co-editor Howard Kessinger said his paper’s special section brought in more than \$5,000 in additional ad revenue. *The Advocate* has a readership of more than 5,000.

Van Sickle said throughout the process of promoting the special section to advertisers, she encouraged them to include historical information or photos on their respective business, to better link it to the community’s history.

She said the local banks, especially The Riley County Bank, were instrumental in generating added advertising revenue for the section. Van Sickle said while some were more than happy to include the history of their business and their pride in their past, others were more modest and humble in their presentation.

“The banks did print some of their own history, but some don’t like to toot their own horn,” she said. “We had (merchants) who could’ve expanded on their history (in the ads)

and chose not to, but we offered that.”

Van Sickle said she realizes that many of the local merchants could have given their advertising dollars to other area newspapers, but most gave both their money and their support to the Legacy project because of the youth involved and because the ads in the section would be seen by other readers for years to come.

“(Advertisers) are so good at supporting anything where there are young people involved. They see the young folks as the future,” Van Sickle said.

“You realize how much the community businesses are contacted by outside sources to have their advertising dollars go elsewhere, and you’re grateful for what they give you. They knew this was something that would be kept for historical reasons and that this would be read down the line.”

Regardless of the reasons advertisers decide to spend their money on these commemorative sections, perhaps more important than bringing in more ad money is determining what to do with it. Despite the need for many community newspapers to upgrade software or facilities, Lauterer said, editors and publishers would be wise to focus their funds on the very people who helped put the section together, be it journalists employed at the paper or community members who contributed articles or editorials.

Lauterer suggested establishing a monetary bonus to staff members or an honorarium to pay those student interns or community members who contribute articles to the section. This act, he pointed out, would help raise morale among the newsroom staff, and it would act as a subtle “thank you” to those community members on whom

your paper relies for historical data and story ideas. Bringing in and paying “fresh faces,” Lauterer said, also would add a fresh perspective to the paper’s reporting on the town’s history. Instead of handing the coverage over to staff members who simply “go through the motions” of reporting on the town’s history, find a longtime community member or an intern who can be excited about the town and write about it enthusiastically. Then, reward them with some of the funds you acquired from your ad sales. Taking these steps can only bring a newspaper closer to its community — both its established members and those experiencing it for the first time.

“You can build on a culture of community in the newsroom,” he said. “You can build morale and celebrate good, hard work.”

The newspaper’s commemorative section also can indirectly contribute to tourism dollars, as well. Although newspapers like *The Mercury* and *The Collegian* might charge no more than a dollar or two to those who wish to purchase a copy, Lauterer said he suggests distributing the section free of charge to local restaurants and hotels. The paper, then, could act as an introduction to the town and its history and merchants for those new to town. Or, Lauterer said, it could serve as a way for those who have moved from the town to rediscover it – and their favorite stores and businesses.

“There’s got to be an intersection between surprise and information,” he said.

**Commemorative newspaper sections educate the youth of the community through use of the newspaper in historical societies, museums, and classrooms of all grade levels.**

The reference to education here has dual meanings: commemorative newspapers should be used to teach students of all ages about their background in the community, but it also can be a practical tool by which students of all ages can learn more about journalism. The example cited by Lauterer in which he advocates hiring interns to help produce commemorative sections is appropriate to this argument.

First, newspapers can teach students so much that textbooks cannot. Newspapers offer firsthand accounts of events, and these accounts are published as soon as these events occur. Looking back at old newspapers, it's interesting to see how someone involved in a tornado in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, reacted to such a natural disaster, as opposed to readers of today, who can anticipate and better prepare for something of the same magnitude. Newspapers give us an immediate snapshot of events that affect our community, our nation, and our world.

With that said, all Manhattan area papers donated several copies to the Riley County Historical Society, local schools in the Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District and the Manhattan Public Library with the specific intention that they be used as historical references.

Jon Brake, editor of *The Manhattan Free Press*, said he's received much interest, both from the historical society and those residents who visit it, about the town's history since the paper published its coverage of Manhattan's celebration. In fact, Brake said, his paper teamed with the historical society for four months to publish parts of the diary of the founder of the town.

“We’re having all kinds of people coming up and saying, ‘I didn’t know Manhattan had that,’” Brake said. “It’s been a real delight.”

The historical society, besides staying connected with Manhattan-area newspapers and contributing content, also has connections with area schools. Cheryl Collins, director of the Riley County Historical Museum, said she has a collection of archived information, from newspapers to brochures to photos, that teachers within the school district can specifically check out for their students for use in a paper or project. Such materials offer insight that no textbook produced on the other side of the country can, she said.

“In a lot of ways, newspapers are better than textbooks, because they allow students to discover the history of their community themselves, which makes it a lot more personal for them,” Collins said.

Collins also said that educating oneself on a town’s history can give a person a more solid connection to his or her home.

“With (K-State) and (Fort Riley), this is an extremely transient place, and it’s really hard for people to connect because they may only be here for a little while,” she said.

“But local history can make that connection for you. It’s important for people to connect with where they live.”

Lauterer said community newspapers and their special sections play a greater role in education about one’s town than most journalists would tend to believe.

“Community newspapers in general are responding to the documentary imperative,” he said. “The newspaper is the history book of the community. It looks at life in this place, at this time. It is everyman’s history book.”

**Commemorative newspaper sections foster practical experience and team-building skills throughout the production process.**

In addition to learning about their community, students in small towns can benefit both themselves and their local newspaper by becoming involved in the production of a newspaper section commemorating their town’s anniversary. Such was the case for students in the Riley County school district and Kansas State University students, who produced the section “Riley County Legacy” for the local newspaper, *The Riley Countian*, and K-State’s student-run newspaper, *The Collegian*.

Early in the spring 2005 semester, the coordinators of the project met at Riley County High School to discuss story ideas and the timeline for the project. A short time later, junior high and high school students came from the town of Riley to meet with Freeland’s Community Media class to brainstorm theme and story ideas for the special section they were to produce. Each Community Media student and some individual students received story assignments; other younger students worked in groups.

Working with undergraduate and graduate students in a K-State Community Media class, nearly two dozen elementary, middle, and high school students did research on the county’s historic people, places and events, and, with the help of their teachers, the young students wrote articles to be published in the special section. Van Sickle, Freeland and

two K-State graduate students all proofread the articles. Freeland continued to make regular trips to RCHS and Blue Valley/Randolph schools to meet with students about their corrections before the students made final revisions.

K-State undergraduate and graduate students designed the special section using Adobe InDesign software, with photos donated by the local historical society, as well as photos taken by Freeland, a *Collegian* photographer, a high school student, and Kathy Monser, a middle-school teacher in the Blue Valley/Randolph school district.

Sixth-grade students at Riley County Grade School penned “The ABCs of Riley County,” a lighthearted poetic tribute to their home. The poems ran as a double-truck spread in the section.

Julie Doyen, library media specialist at Riley County Grade School, supervised her students’ research and writing of “The ABCs of Riley County.” Doyen said that after the section was printed, her students literally spent hours reading and rereading the publication on their own time. They had learned the value of hard, journalistic work, as well as much about their own community.

“Seeing that other local people put it together made them more interested,” Doyen said of her students, harkening back to Lauterer’s suggestion that local residents provide most of the section’s content. “It provided a sense of ownership and pride, and they wanted to use it more (than textbooks).”

Middle-school teacher Monser said her students felt their hard work paid off.

“When we saw the printed copy of *The Riley Countian*, it was like winning a trophy,” Monser said. “Each of the students looked for the articles they had a part in and were filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment.”

The journalistic skills her students learned, amid the many revisions they were asked to make, were equally worth the experience, Monser said.

“We learned that there were different kinds of writing, and reporting and journalism are far different from writing an essay or a report,” she said. “We found that it was hard work and that (Freeland) would ask us to write and rewrite until we got it right.”

K-State students in Freeland’s Community Media class said they, too, benefited from the practical experience offered by the special section project. J. Scott Bowman, senior in English at K-State and a former student of Freeland’s, said he learned that because of the size of such towns, knowing one’s sources and how to approach them with story ideas and interview questions is important.

“I realized that in small towns, great events (like the 150<sup>th</sup> celebration) require more work to figure out what’s going on and whom you need to talk to,” he said.

Even Van Sickle, a 22-year veteran of *The Riley Countian*, said the project was a learning experience for her, too. For the first time in her tenure, Van Sickle, who has used Adobe Pagemaker in designing her paper since she began as editor, used Adobe InDesign in creating the page templates and designing the ads.

The experience of learning new software was both exciting and challenging, she said.

“My mom always said, ‘You can do anything you have to do,’ and by golly, I did,” Van Sickle said. “Considering we were working on (Riley County Legacy) and putting out our own weekly edition at the same time, I think we did OK.”

Freeland, one of the people who spearheaded the project, said the students’ work on the special section gave them the chance to get out into the community and interact with its residents in person.

“Too often, people rely too much on e-mail and phones for interviews,” she said. “Now, they had to go out and meet people face to face.”

Freeland said if given a second chance, there would be one major revision she would make to the overall organization of the project. She said, though, that she was pleased with what the students took away from the project, both personally and professionally.

“I would’ve liked to have more interaction between the college students and the younger kids,” she said, “but the most important thing was giving them a sense of pride in their community.”

The span of the *Legacy* project was so great that it served as a learning tool for students of all age ranges. Since most were new to the field of journalism, not only did they gain a greater appreciation of the county in which they lived, but they were introduced to a career they eventually might want to pursue. Such fresh faces, as Lauterer pointed out earlier, can only help commemorative sections by offering a new, eager perspective full of wonder.

## **Summary and conclusion**

While these three hypotheses about special sections in newspapers might be obvious to the layperson, there remains a need for these viewpoints to be presented time and again. If you go about the production of these sections by looking at them as a chore that needs to be attended to, your readers will pick up on that apathy. If you're not excited about your town's history, how can you expect them to be? If you bring in budding journalists or seasoned historians from outside the walls of your newsroom, you will find a renewed life in these projects, and that will be evident in the writing, in the photography, in the design of your section. And, if you choose not to, try to see the project as another way for you and your staff to learn more about the town you cover.

If it's monetary benefits your paper seeks, advertisers are sure to bring thousands of additional ad revenue dollars into your paper, thanks to special sections. This is the advertiser's chance to tout the history of his or her business and the role it plays in the community's economy. And, with the added revenue, you can be sure to maintain high morale among your newsroom employees and contributing writers and historians by issuing an honorarium to each person who helped in the production of the special section.

By examining these financial and educational benefits, the production of your next special section commemorating special events in your town can be a learning experience (and a profitable one, at that). All it takes is optimism, willingness to learn, and an eager attitude.

## **Where to start?**

If your town faces an upcoming anniversary and you're not sure where to begin your coverage, these few ideas should help get your started on your big project:

1. Talk to the people who live in your town. Sometimes, your best historian won't be the president of the historical society. It will be the little 85-year-old lady living by your church. These are the residents who sometimes get overlooked. But just get them talking about your community's past and you'll be amazed at the story ideas you'll receive from just one conversation.
2. Remember that although the people make up your community, your town wouldn't be there if it weren't for the historical buildings and places that make it great. Go to churches, schools, cemeteries and the like to get their history and what they mean to everyone in town.
3. Profile the organizations that fuel volunteerism in your town. Get people excited about its past through your other stories, but profile organizations like Rotary Club to get people excited about your town's future. Don't forget that one of the jobs of a newspaper is to get residents engaged and involved in their community.

4. When the time comes for the planning of celebratory events, cover every single planning meeting. Again, these coverage stories will help call your readers to action and get them involved in the planning stages themselves. They won't know what is needed for the parade or pancake feed unless you tell them. This is another excellent way to get your readers involved in your town and give them a sense of pride and a feeling that they contributed to the celebration.

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