

# Industry Pioneers

*The free-paper industry has a rich history. And, many people from the Midwest played an important role in its development and growth. The caring, sharing and support members offer each other make this an industry like no other. In this section we will share features from people past and present who helped create the unusual dynamic we enjoy today.*

*If you know of a person or company that should be featured, please contact Lee at [director@mfc.org](mailto:director@mfc.org)*

**This month we are featuring Gerald (Jerry) and Louise Johnson from the Fulda Free Press and Murray County ADvantage.**



**Jerry and Louise Johnson 2022**

**“Because it was  
for sale.”**

*This was reason enough to start a continuing legacy spanning over 50 years.*

*Jerry and Louise Johnson share their story about the Fulda Free Press and Murray County ADvantage.*



*Left: Fulda Free Press building in 1973.*

*Center: Gerald (Jerry) Johnson at his induction in the Minnesota Newspaper Association's Half Century Club at the 156<sup>th</sup> MNA Convention in Brooklyn Park, MN- January 26, 2023.*

*Right: Current Fulda Free Press building.*

The story of Jerry and Louise and their 50+ year legacy is a joint effort. Norma Dittman, Fulda Free Press staff writer, wrote an article that was published in the Fulda Free Press on February 8, 2023.

Louise adjusted the content to fit our needs. Their fascinating story is a must-read for those who remember our industry 50 years ago and also for those who now benefit from the sacrifices and struggles of Industry Pioneers like Jerry and Louise Johnson.

Enjoy!

For more than 50 years, readers of the Fulda Free Press have garnered the news, sports, and events from the Fulda area due to the work of publisher, Gerald D. (Jerry) Johnson. He was inducted into the Minnesota Newspaper Association's Half Century Club on Thursday, January 26, 2023, during the 156th MNA Convention held in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota.

When asked why they had purchased the newspaper, Jerry smiled and responded, "Because it was for sale." But then he and Louise began sharing their story. Louise explained, "I was working part-time for the Fulda Free Press while Jim Frick was the owner. Connie Wordelman then purchased the business. She took out the large press that was in the building, remodeled the building, and installed the process camera for page negatives and plate burner. I worked part-time operating a Justewriter (an electric typewriter that made columns of news). Connie began talking about selling the Fulda Free Press and I told Jerry that it was for sale."

"At the time," Jerry added, "I was working for the State of Minnesota. We were building Interstate 90 near Worthington, Minnesota. When Louise told me that the Fulda Free Press was for sale, we talked about it and then we purchased it, and took possession on August 1st." Louise continued to work at the newspaper and Jerry continued working for the State of Minnesota until the following summer. "I was working on the interstate road. We were near Sherburn by then. I would come home to Fulda and work at the newspaper until midnight and then have to be back on the job at 6 a.m. the next morning," Jerry shared. "That wasn't working out too well, so I quit working for the State and began working full-time at the Fulda Free Press."

Jerry said that the linotype was the first machine that he worked with when he began working at the Fulda Free Press. He recalls the big arms of the machine working together in rhythm as they set the type that was needed. He also spoke of the belts and pulleys that were used to operate the machine, as well as talking about the longest belt that ran beneath the floor into the basement of the first Fulda Free Press building owned by the Johnson's. (That building now houses Main Street Tax.)

For a time, Jim Frick continued to operate the linotype for the Johnson's, teaching Jerry each function of the machine. (A linotype is a type of 19th century printing technique that printed an entire line instead of each character on the printing surface. The linotype process allowed the quick and easy printing in bulk of products such as newspapers, magazines and books.)

"When we took over the Fulda Free Press, Louise knew quite a bit about the newspaper, but I really knew nothing about it. I soon learned," Jerry commented.

During the first six years of ownership, Louise was working at the Fulda Free Press as well as caring for two little boys, Randy and Kirk, at home. She would spend long hours addressing each newspaper after they were printed on Wednesdays, preparing them for mailing through the United States Postal Service.

It wasn't long before the Johnson's hired a couple of girls to do the typing of the newspaper. Once the typing was waxed (using wax and specials rollers) onto the pages of the paper, then they could be photographed.

Jerry would make negatives of the paper in the process camera and burn plates in the plate burner at the office of the Fulda Free Press. Then on Wednesday mornings, he would head for the printer with those plates carefully packaged in a newspaper sized, thin cardboard container.

What wasn't seen by the subscribers to the Fulda Free Press were the many hours spent putting the paper together each week. Those hours would always go into the wee hours of the morning. "That was tough. We'd work until 2 or 3 a.m. and then I'd get up by 7 p.m. to take the plates to the printers," Jerry shared.

In 1978, Louise began working full-time for a law office in Worthington, Minnesota, and continues to be employed there today. For several years, Louise also did the bookkeeping for the newspaper. After a few years, employees were hired to do the bookkeeping, but she continued to do the accounts payable and other duties.

Jerry took over the full-time publishing duties after Louise began outside employment, with the help of their sons, Randy and Kirk, and several loyal employees.

The Fulda Free Press was located at 204 N. St. Paul Avenue in Fulda until 1988, when Jerry and Louise purchased the building at 118 N. St. Paul Avenue in Fulda from Larry Gielen and moved the offices of the Fulda Free Press to that location.

The Southwestern Peach, an advertising supplement in 16 area newspapers, has been part of the Fulda Free Press since 1973.

Sister publications owned and published by Jerry and Louise are the Tri County News in Heron Lake, purchased in 1985; the Murray County News in Slayton, started in 1987; and the Nobles County Review, purchased in 1991.

Publication of the Murray County ADvantage, was started in 1997, and is distributed free to over 8,000 homes and businesses in Murray County and the surrounding area.

Jerry and Louise have two sons, Randy (Nancy) and Kirk (Parnjai), two grandchildren and three great grandchildren.