

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.

This month our feature story is about Craig Trongaard. Craig shares an interesting story about the time he was called back to active duty and needed to sell his paper with only days to do so. It is a true testament to our earlier pioneers and the high level of honesty and integrity with which they operated.

We would like to feature many more pioneers. Do you have someone in mind? If so, please reach out via email to director@mfc.org with the appropriate contact information. We'll take it from there!



The Grapevine Story

By Craig Trongaard

A few weeks past, Lee Borkowski and I met for lunch as we both were past AFCP President's and enjoy reminiscing about the association back then, and its members. Somewhere in the conversation she asked how and when did my career in the shopper business begin. After telling her my story it was not too many days later, she called me and asked if I would write my story and be willing to share it. How do you say no to Lee?

Imagine if you will, trying to recall events and time lines from over 50 years ago! But in the end, my memory does accurately capture the time and place of how some of us got into this line of publishing and for a few that had to get out. Here it is:

Late 1966 or early '67, a want ad in the Sioux City Journal noted a shopper in western Iowa was for sale. Upon inquiry, the paper, a shopper, circulated in Onawa and several small towns south with roughly 3,000 to 4,000 circulation. Called The Grapevine, it was owned for an unknown period by the pastor of a small church in South Sioux City, Nebraska. Can you imagine?

After meeting with the pastor, my wife and I made an offer and bought the shopper for about \$5,000. Assets consisted of the paper, sheet fed press, box camera, strip printer with half dozen strip negative fonts, graphic illustration books, receivables and a jogger for the mail room. We had no legal paperwork done, just a check and hand shake.

We ran the shopper out of our home in Sioux City for the first half dozen issues. I pressed it on the 1250 Multilith sheet fed. It soon became evident this single sheet format was not going anywhere so we quickly jobbed the printing out to a web press printer in Vermillion, South Dakota. For better part of a year things were going well, the paper looked great, expanded the distribution and was being well received by the advertisers and readers. Business was growing! Then on January 28th, 1968, the US Navy Ship Pueblo was captured by the North Koreans and taken into their port. Shortly thereafter President Lyndon Johnson called to active duty several guard units of which the air guard unit I belonged to in Sioux City was one of them. I believe they gave a few of us that had a business a couple days to “what do I do now” with the business.

During these couple days’ time a local tv station interviewed me as to what was I going to do with my business now that I was recalled to active duty? Being Mary and I were the only employees and she was soon to have our first child my response was simply: I don’t know.

The same night as that broadcast John Holmes, owner of the Whiting Newspaper called me to extend help in any way he could while I was gone. He offered to literally run the shopper for us or was willing to buy it if that was what I would prefer. I had been thinking of having to sell and had a price range based on sales/profits and potential. After a few minutes on the phone, we agreed to a price with terms. Those being 12 monthly payments at an interest rate that was current at the time. He did not want the press equipment and said he would collect all the receivables at no cost, both current and aged, and send a monthly check on those collections. That was the extent of our agreement. Neither one of us ever brought up the need to having papers drawn up, for us there was no need to, our word was not negotiable and it played out exactly as John proposed. There was no ink to dry!

It made a lot of sense for John to acquire the Grapevine whose distribution was directly south of his area, and the cross-selling potential was a given. I saw John at one of our AFCP meetings and we both spoke on would that kind of verbal agreement fly today? No.

p.s. I often wished I would have kept the strip printer and fonts. It was unique and first generation in cold type composition.