

# Growing Up a Free Paper Kid



**Melvin and Reva  
Murphy in 1953**



By Lee Borkowski

Like many of you I was raised in the free paper industry.

My grandparents, Melvin and Reva Murphy started a shopper called Trade Lines in August of 1949. Their office was the dining room table of the multi-generational family home. Grandma handled sales and layout. Grandpa, who worked as a tool and die maker by trade, was in charge of pressing the paper when he came home from work. The paper was collated and then bundled for delivery by the USPS. My Mom still remembers being lulled to sleep by the sound of the mimeograph machine running the single pages one at a time late into the night.

It didn't take too long before the business outgrew the dining room table. The family moved to a new home and the paper was run from the basement. It stayed in that location for about 10 years and was then moved to a remodeled home located just off Main Street.

Like so many shoppers this was a family business and everyone got to play a part. At about 12 years of age, I got my first delivery route. Our town was very long and narrow. I was assigned the North side of Main Street and delivered about 225 papers each week. Remember I said the town was long and narrow...my route was 2 miles long! Delivery wasn't too bad in the good weather but when the snow was deep, I hated it! And, there was no one to help me. Mom and Dad were both working and it was my job to deliver the papers... period!

Our carrier guidelines required that I rubber band the paper to the door knobs of every home and I was to make sure I used the door that they used the most. That meant having to walk down the side of most houses to deliver to the back door. Added steps, more snow!

As I recall I earned \$2.65 every two weeks for carrying the papers. This would have been in 1970. My Dad offered to cash my checks on his way home from work. He strongly recommended that I save a good portion of the check. And, he said that if I were to save the whole check, he would round up the deposit for me. I agreed and he made the deposit for \$5.00.

I thought I was rich! I loved looking at my saving book and seeing how much the account was growing. Between the paper route and babysitting I amassed a small fortune. I used some of the money to buy a record player (because I was cool!) and a registered Quarter Horse (because I was not too smart!).

During the summers I would volunteer my time at the paper. Usually, I was answering phones and taking classified ads or delivering papers. What meant the most to me was that I was getting to spend time with my grandparents.

In 1976 I graduated high school and headed to college. My course of study was in Pre-Veterinary Science. I did okay in my studies but my heart just wasn't in becoming a veterinarian. Toward the end of my junior year while home for a weekend I told my grandma that I wished to join her in the business. She was thrilled! Turns out my timing was pretty good, too. As this conversation took place on a Friday night, I discovered that she was meeting with a man from upper Michigan on Saturday morning who was going to present her with an offer to buy the paper.

I returned to college and began taking as many business/marketing classes as I could while still staying on track to graduate in four years with my Bachelor of Science degree.

Though Grandma welcomed me into the business she didn't just hand over the reins. I started work in June of 1980 and was earning a whopping \$3.10 per hour (which happened to be the national minimum wage). Too bad my dad wasn't still alive at that time. I could have benefited from his rounding up my deposits!

Grandma's plan was to have me learn the business from the ground up. My first assignment was to learn typesetting and layout. From there I was assigned to the distribution department, then accounting and finally sales and sales management. My training through all of the departments took over five years.

During this time, I was also encouraged to become active in the state and national associations. I served on the board of directors for Shopping Guides of Michigan (later renamed Community Papers of Michigan) and the National Association of Advertising Publishers (which is known today as ACP). My employment took me from Michigan to Wisconsin where I joined the Community Papers of Wisconsin. No matter the association, my time served was invaluable. I learned so much from the people I met while serving and made many lifelong friends along the way.

Today I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Midwest Free Community Papers association. I still stay in touch with many of the "old timers" and they all have interesting stories to tell.