

It's 40 years and counting!

WITH THIS ISSUE, the Citizen marks the completion of four decades since its humble birth in September 1974.

Back then, we managed to put out the paper with a staff of three - an editor/reporter, receptionist and ad manager - and equipment that consisted mainly of three desks, three old typewriters and a basic telephone setup in the small office a couple of doors down Broadway from Orangeville's town hall.

Perhaps it was that modest startup, but whatever the case the Citizen operated for quite awhile without much notice being given by either the Banner itself or the (then) mighty Thomson newspaper chain, which had purchased it in 1959 from the McKittrick family.

Since then, the Banner's ownership has changed three times - first to Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc., later to a spinoff, Osprey Media LP, and finally to the Toronto Star's Metroland Media Group, Ontario's largest and most successful community newspaper publisher.

Although it began life as a family-owned child of the Shelburne Free Press and Economist, the Citizen today is part of the Simcoe York newspaper group owned by Belfountain native Ray Stanton, who began acquiring community newspapers after successfully pioneering the construction of student residences in colleges and universities across Canada. So although we're unable to continue to boast that the Citizen is locally owned in the community it served, that's still almost the case.

Forty years ago, the current Editor had fairly recently acquired The Free Press and Economist from his father, Fred M. Claridge, who seven years earlier had inherited the publication on the death in 1964 of its long-time owner, T. F. E. Claridge.

Within months of the purchase in January 1972, the new owner discovered that technological change in the community newspaper industry had created a need to switch from letterpress to offset printing and from hot- to cold-type pages. That meant, among other things, the removal of almost everything in the Main Street plant and the creation of a firm that purchased an offset printing press capable of putting out several papers in far less time than was required to print just one on the FP&E's fairly modern flatbed press.

And it was the same technological change that created an opportunity to provide the first competition the Banner was to face since the death of the Orangeville Sun in the Great Depression four decades earlier.

Since its first issue on Sept. 18, 1974, the Citizen has always had what the industry refers to as a "controlled circulation," relying on its advertisers rather than its readers for the revenue needed for its survival. And that meant a need to produce a product that would provide at least as much news and opinions as would be found across the street in a Thomson paper that boasted a paid circulation base.

(Today, the Banner and other Metroland papers also have controlled circulation but get much of their revenue from the distribution of multiple flyers, critics often referring to the publications as "flyer wraps.")

Meanwhile, the onslaught of technological change has seen production of the Citizen change from "cut and paste" pages (with the pages being manually assembled on boards) to "pagination," wherein all news and advertising is produced on computers and the pages are transmitted by high-speed Internet to the printing plant in Mississauga, rather than transported there by car - an unhappy challenge in the days when our printer was in Barrie, and particularly during winter storms.

Today, when many daily papers are failing in both Canada and the United States, with cities as large as Kamloops BC (pop. 85,000) being left with no local daily, community newspapers are faring relatively well, perhaps because they are still the only medium that gives full coverage to local news and views.

And that's one reason to hope we'll be around for many years to come.