

Extra! Extra! Reporter makes history at presentation

By mark d. marotta

Staff Writer

LANSDALE — Nearly 150 years of North Penn area journalism were examined in a Lansdale Historical Society presentation Tuesday night.

Dick Shearer, the society president and former Reporter editor, gave the talk, entitled “Extra! Extra! Read All about It!” Willard Kriebel, a former Reporter photographer who had made the trip from Florida, also shared reminiscences.

“We start with not the Lansdale Reporter. It was not the first newspaper,” Shearer said.

He explained that John Shupe brought a German-language paper called Die Presse from Norristown, where it had been supplanted by the growth of the English-speaking population. Shearer said Lansdale was a logical location because of its railroad junction.

According to Shearer, the paper published under a Lansdale masthead in 1861. But it was soon gone, with the spread of the English language, he added. By the 1890s, German-language newspapers were gone from Montgomery County.

Shearer said a Frederick Wagner, a German immigrant who had come to the United States in the 1840s, had worked for Shupe and saw an opportunity to start a paper of his own, but he decided it would be in English. The first issue of the Lansdale Reporter was on Oct. 27, 1870, and it was produced on the site of the American Legion building at Second and Walnut streets.

Wagner was a printer, and he was like many around the country who used a newspaper to promote their business, Shearer said. He added that the papers mostly were just four pages long, with the material on the front and back sides preprinted in Philadelphia.

Shearer said Wagner had the paper for seven years, selling it to a Lancaster printer who owned it for four or five years. In the early 1880s, ownership went to a Dr. Andrews, in partnership with A. K. Thomas, who went on to the Ambler Gazette and the Intelligencer.

The subsequent purchaser, H. M. Woodmansee, an editor and reporter from New Jersey, revolutionized The Reporter by instituting coverage of borough council and school boards, and having correspondents submitting “town notes” from surrounding communities, Shearer said.

One anecdote he shared was that Woodmansee periodically would take what would appear to be a day off so that he could hang around at a men’s club next to the newspaper building and spy on how many of the employees skipped out of work.

Meanwhile, Shearer said, a rival newspaper called The Lansdale Republican was launched around 1885. The two papers had a “friendly competition,” he added.

Eventually, the Republican was merged with The Review, which was originally a North Wales newspaper, and Chester Knipe became the editor and publisher.

In 1915, Woodmansee died suddenly, and his estate put The Reporter up for sale. It was purchased by Walter Sanborn and William Temple, both of whom were from New England. Shearer said neither man had run a newspaper before, and it was eventually sold to the North Penn Review.

“They became one paper,” he added.

Shearer said Sanborn was humiliated by the fact that he had lost The Reporter. From 1924-27, he went on the road to sell newspaper supplies, and came up with enough money to buy out Chester Knipe. When Sanborn got the paper back, he removed the name of The Review from the masthead.

"He started what he called a new era," Shearer said. Among other things, a new plant was set up on Courtland Street, and the paper was published five days a week.

Shearer said Sanborn did not live much beyond the end of the Second World War, dying in 1947. He had made arrangements for two long-time employees, George Knipe and Howard Berky, to have the option to purchase the paper.

In 1952, Berky traveled to Texas to purchase a second-hand press, which required new space for the newspaper. Shearer said that, by 1966-67, the newspaper started looking at an offset press, which allowed for color printing.

An open house marking The Reporter's 100th anniversary attracted 5,000 visitors, Shearer said.

"It was tremendously popular," he added.

The newspaper's circulation topped 21,500, Shearer said.

"Things changed," he added. In July 1980, it was announced that the paper was being sold to the Gannett Corporation, publisher of USA Today.

In 2001, Gannett sold The Reporter to the Journal Register Company.

"That's where it rests now," Shearer said.

Today, with increasing interest in the electronic media, newspapers face an uncertain future.

"That's our story," Shearer said.



MARK C. PSORAS/THE REPORTER

Dick Shearer speaks during the Lansdale Historical Society's program "Extra! Extra!" on Tuesday.