

Brief History of the *Commercial Record*

by Kit Lane

The *Saugatuck Commercial* first began publication July 9, 1868. It is the oldest newspaper in Allegan County in continuous publication, the only time the newspaper did not print was a couple of weeks in 1886. The *Allegan Journal* at the county seat which is related to the present-day Allegan newspaper is older, it was first published in the 1850s, but it has not been continuous.

The first editor of the *Saugatuck Commercial* was Dr. A. H. Pattee, whose medical practice (according to the ads in his own newspaper) specialized in corns and consumption. He had previously published a paper at Hudson which he left under strange circumstances. The Hudson Post later reported, "Dr. Pattee, recently of this town, has moved on to Saugatuck where people are just discovering that he is a fakir of the worst kind." It is unclear whether they are referred to his doctoring or his editing.

In 1869 the newspaper was taken over by his brother F. B. Pattee and some accounts claim that the doctor went over to Douglas to establish the Douglas Messenger but it was not a success. The following year, 1870, the Pattees sold out to a group of Saugatuck men who established E. W. Perry as manager. The newspaper was renamed the *Lake Shore Commercial* to include Douglas and the lakeshore.

Perry wrote: "Again we ask our friends to send us short items of news from every part of the country. . . no one looks for fine writing in a weekly paper, as they know our time is short for it, therefore, you need not hesitate to do your duty by us and send on anything of interest -- new subscriptions are of interest."

The location of the first newspaper office is unknown, but In 1871 the editor wrote that they were moving ". . . to new, well lighted pleasant rooms on the west side of the square and near the corner where the pretty girls play croquet and bother our compositors."

In 1873 newspaper was purchased by Myron W. Tarbox and sold two years later to John Wilson and Henry Elmeyer, who established Charles M. Winslow as editor. In 1877 Byron Markham became owner and later in the year made Charles F. Wasson, a printer in the office that he probably could not afford to pay, a partner. The name was unsteady at this time, it changed from *Lake Shore Commercial* to *The Commercial*, and back to *Lake Shore Commercial*.

Life wasn't easy back in the old days, the October 26, 1877 issue recounted:

More things have combined this week to prevent our paper coming out on time than ever occurred to us in one week before. first our Mr. Wasson had business in Chicago and after the paper was off last Friday he got ready to go expecting to be gone two days, instead, owing to rough weather he was gone till Friday morning of this week. next thing, more job work was required than we could have done had we been full handed. Various other things got in the way, but to cap the whole business just as we were ready for proof the cry of fire was heard from Douglas and Mr. Wasson, who is a member of the fire department, had to go to it, and before he came back Mr. Hauer who has been sick for a long time and who was cared for by Mr. Dixon who turned press for us, died and Mr. Dixon had to go and dress the body for burials and those of us left in the office are wondering at the peculiar dispositions of providence.

Markham sold out to Wasson in March of 1878 and since Wasson was a printer, he established Mrs. Lena Woodhull as editor, one of the first female newspaper editors in the state.

The Commercial was the only paper many people received and it had to cover all the news: local, national and worldwide. When the newsprint arrived, usually by boat, the news from outside the area was already printed on one side. It would be placed on the press in position to have the local news and advertisements added to the back.

In April of 1882 the paper was sold to Adrian Houtkamp. In 1885 Charles Winslow, a former editor, returned to Michigan and started a newspaper in Douglas called the *Weekly Record*. Editor Houtkamp was incensed and wrote in the January 1, 1886 issue:

Three years and nine months ago I bought the *Lake Shore Commercial*. I have owned it longer than any other person. It having been clearly demonstrated in the past two years that there is no possible show for a man with a family -- let him live ever so economical -- to make more than a bare living in the printing business here, the publisher has concluded to shut up shop and go where his labor will pay him.

The paper was not published for two weeks, the only issues missed in more than a century of its existence. The January 22, 1886, issue introduced editor Fred Wade, related to the Wades who were founding fathers of Douglas. He ran the paper for 12 years, serving simultaneously as village president for some of those years, and later postmaster, and a member of the Michigan House of Representatives.

In September of 1898 the paper was purchased by William P. Dunton who changed the name back to the *Saugatuck Commercial*. In 1902 he bought the subscription list of the ten-year-old but struggling *Douglas Weekly Record* and thus began the *Commercial-Record* first it was hyphenated. Some people in Douglas were

unhappy that their newspaper had been sold out so they began *Douglas Herald* but it only a short time.

In 1902 the *Commercial Record* was sold to Otis O. Hauke, who moved the offices to Butler Street where the Heath block was later built. His daughter visited some time ago and said she always had fondest memories of her life in Saugatuck, but her father sold the paper April 12, 1917, as World War I was looming and those with German surnames often found themselves in difficulty.

The new owner was Lintford B. Goshorn, related to those who lent their name to Goshorn Lake. He ran the paper for nine years and died unexpectedly in April of 1926. After his death his wife continued to run the paper for more than a year, Saugatuck's second female editor. In 1927 sold to Mr. and Mrs. R. E. Madden of Chicago, who was related to the family that ran the Plainwell newspaper. The office was on Hoffman Street, using the building that was later Grubowsky's and later Water Street Cafe, now Back Alley Pizza (and now fronts on Water Street). The Simmons family lived upstairs and Ruth, sister of the man honored in this year's exhibit, said it was a fine place to live except when they were running the press, which was usually done early enough to get it into subscriber's mailboxes the same day,. When printing was delayed there was little sleep in the Simmons house. While the press was in operation you had to hang onto the bed. One night she put on a robe and went down to complain to the editor that "she had laid there and watched as all of the bottles on the dresser marched to the edge and jumped off and she wondered when he would be finished so she could go to sleep."

The press was an old flatbed, so it didn't hum like modern rotary presses, it had a big arm that grasped and advanced each sheet, Parker Sands, an old printer under Madden, described it as "SLAM rumble, SLAM rumble." The sheets were split by a little cutting wheel and inserted and folded by hand.

By 1942 the masthead proclaimed that it was The Commercial Record "The Oldest Newspaper in Allegan County." It was sold October 18, 1946 to Robert and Gwen Crawford, who moved it to a small brick building next to their house on Culver street. In 1950 the newspaper began being published in the smaller size, or tabloid size.

In 1951 the operation was sold to T. E. Van Dussen who owned the newspapers in Fennville and Hamilton. He printed all of them in Saugatuck. One snowy day he turned the corner coming into Lake Street too sharply and spilled the made-up forms over the embankment, soon the whole staff was on their hands and knees plucking type from the snow. In 1952 Van Dussen appointed William R. Simmons as editor. so that he could provide the people with a paper that was "of, by and for Saugatuck and Douglas." Bill wrote a front-page column, the most famous paragraph is:

Harry Newnam violently denounces the base canard that the sidewalks are rolled up on Labor Day and stored for the winter. No such thing -- in Saugatuck they are set up on one side to act as snow fences.

Van Dussen sold in 1955 to Pat and Ed Bigelow, former publishers of the Cordova Alaska Times, Pat was a polio victim and worked from a hospital bed, but they were plagued by ill health and hired Mary K. Bettles to assist them. The Bigelows returned the paper to Van Dussen who established Bill Simmons once again as editor.

It is ironic that although Simmons was an excellent photographer, as demonstrated in the 2001 exhibit, few of his pictures were used, because of the difficulties of using locally made pictures. They printed on an old flatbed press in the basement of the office on Lake Street. Forms were made up of text material set by linotype, handset headline type and ads and some national photographs that arrived at the newspaper office as paper molds and were filled with molten lead. Local pictures had to be taken to Grand Rapids where zinc plates were made, it was expensive and hard to do on a deadline.

The newspaper was sold in 1958 to Dale E. Royer, from Three Rivers who kept Bill Simmons as editor. Royer was a printer by profession and later said, "I tried writing something for the paper just once and got myself in a lot of trouble, so I left the writing to Bill from then on."

In 1957 a new flag (the paper's nameplate on the front page) was created by local artist Fred Stearns. There is a lot of history in the flag if you look closely. The perspective is fictitious although you might come close from the back porch of the old Douglas schoolhouse. At left is the brand new St. Peter's Church, center the Michael Brown Spencer house which served as the first Tara restaurant. It burned and was rebuilt and recently razed. In the center, Mt. Baldhead and the radar before the dome was put on, and in the water the twin-stacked excursion boat, Island Queen. To the right, Coral Gables and the Big Pavilion, which burned in 1960 and the school up on the hill. In June of 1965 Royer sold the newspaper to William R. Parker, an advertising man from Dearborn, who rapidly found out that a small town newspaper was not the kind of new life he was looking for. He left in 1967 and shortly afterwards moved the family to Australia.

The new owners were Kit and Art Lane, formerly of Detroit, most recently of Murphysboro, Illinois, who ran it for 21 years establishing a new record as local owners. In 1968 they celebrated the newspaper's centennial with a special edition. After all of their children were in school, they purchased The Fennville Herald which Kit edited from 1978 to 1988. It was said to be the only his and hers newspapers in the state.

Both newspapers were sold in 1988 to Kaechele Publications. In 1995 the Fennville Herald folded into the Allegan County News.

Kaechele Publications was sold to the present owner, Mike Wilcox of Wilcox Newspapers in 2015.