

Esther's Trumpet  
September 27, 2010

### **All The News That's Fit To Print**

I attended a lecture recently given by Dr. Ed Williams, who is a Journalism Professor at Auburn. It was delightful to hear him delving into the past describing the importance of community newspapers. I loved hearing the stories about quaint and unusual stories, obituaries and community news written in that old time folksy style.

I love newspapers. I love the feel of them in my hand; I love turning the pages, noticing the fonts that are used. And I worry that we are allowing the Internet to take that away from us. Indeed, we hear the stories of big papers failing, but our community newspapers are still doing ok. That's because they print news that we want to know that usually isn't covered in the larger dailies.

A newspaper, however, is no easy task. While the coverage of community events, obituaries and pleasant community gatherings is important, the hard news is important as well. And I for one expect newspapers to have editorials; the editor taking a position on issues important to the community. I love it when newspapers explain their reasons and then endorse political candidates. But that takes courage.

Somebody is always going to be mad at the paper. So the leadership of the paper has to weigh whether or not stories or editorials will cost them readers. We really don't want to hear other sides of a story. Most of us really want the paper to agree with us, and we often get mad when they don't. After I asked a question about investigative journalism in Alabama (or the lack thereof) Dr. Williams made mention of Goodloe Sutton.

So I decided to look him up. Goodloe Sutton Sr. was the editor of The Democrat Reporter in Linden, Alabama. Goodloe and his wife Jean were an incredible couple.. In 1998 the sheriff of Marengo County and his Chief Deputy earned long prison sentences for corruption that ranged from petty theft to drug peddling. And it all began with the Suttons digging, researching, poring over public records and holding folks accountable. It cost them big. The paper's circulation dropped substantially and the Suttons had to endure threats and ridicule. But they held fast to their belief that it was the responsibility of the paper to print the truth. "Family and friendships are often stronger than truth in a small town", says Jean Sutton. "We put people in the newspaper when they do something 'unusual'. Friends, everybody". And they did, even writing about a close relative who had been arrested for DUI.

It's a balancing act for sure, but if you are lucky enough to have a locally owned newspaper, and if that paper covers the news with courage and principle, you are one of the lucky few. Even editorials, opinion pieces, such as Esther's Trumpet, can be frightening to a paper. I had one editor tell me he would only run my column if the paper could make changes. Not just grammar or basic editing; changes in content. I declined.

I believe that most folks understand that Esther's Trumpet is my opinion, and mine alone. I think people are interested in different points of view. And although I do sometimes cover controversial topics, I think that contributes to a paper's growth.

Most of the time a newspaper is owned by a big corporation, and that entity controls the content. Even an ace reporter will get a story slashed if it differs with the point of view of the power structure of the paper. So if the big corporations own the newspapers, the television channels and the radio stations, doesn't that alert you that we don't always get the full story? That has never been more true than it is today.

With the 30 second sound bites on TV and the canned news stories from the mainstream media, we are lucky to have a good number of local weekly newspapers in Alabama. And some of them have real courage, commitment and dedication to printing all the news that's fit to print. You can do your part to keep that coming by subscribing, reading, and feeling that crisp paper in your hand rather than on a screen. You may even join me out on your front porch in the early morning hours, sipping coffee and reading your local paper. It's a great way to start the day.

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