

CONNECTIONS

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**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap
between Communities and Local
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THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:
Fractured or United?

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Community Building in an Old-Fashioned Way

By Maura Casey

An experiment in rural community building and democratic citizenship in Alabama has a back-to-the-future feel: Involved citizens see newspapers as key to helping small towns preserve their history and strengthen their communities. They have started four publications this year and hope to start several more.

All well and good, but . . . *newspapers?* Those old-fashioned things printed on paper with headlines and black type, with ink that sometimes gets a little smudgy and comes off on your hands?

Really?



PHOTO BY MAURA CASEY



An experiment in rural community building and democratic citizenship in Alabama has a back-to-the-future feel: Involved citizens see newspapers as key to helping small towns preserve their history and strengthen their communities.

Yes, really, says Jack Shelton. Shelton is leading this effort with PACERS, an Alabama nonprofit organization that he helped found more than 40 years ago to help improve small rural schools. PACERS began at the University of Alabama and the acronym originally stood for Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools. But the organization has long since been identified by its acronym alone and few remember what the words stood for. Its mission has grown also, to encompass a statewide effort to enhance not only schools, but community life in small towns.

The current project, dubbed the PACERS Rural Community Newspaper Network, came about as the result of deliberations conducted in five small towns. The question before the deliberative meetings was, “What is the best thing we can do for our communities?” The answer was, by consensus, “publish local newspapers.”

This is not as strange as it might seem for those of a certain age who remember learning about current events without the help of an active Twitter feed or Facebook posts. Their memories include getting regular newspaper deliveries at home, the better to read over coffee or comment on after breakfast.

Go further back than even several decades ago and the impact of newspapers was even more pronounced. At the turn of the 20th century, Alabama had as many as 1,100 newspapers, mostly weeklies, published all around the state, said Garrett Lane. Lane is a former journalist and digital editor whose career ran the gamut from the *Tuscaloosa News* to Time, Inc.

He is one of the consultants for the newspaper project and sees the initiative for the community-building exercise it is meant to be. “There may be a pure, forward-looking strain of citizen journalism manifesting itself in what’s been done to date,” he said.

“It’s equally fascinating to imagine this strain of citizen journalism as a root-remedy for media distrust. We probably don’t understand in full what’s taking shape at this stage, though we can sense implications for democracy and community building.”

It might be that rural areas are particularly fertile ground for an idea such as this one. Yet citizens’ desire for a local newspaper was not necessarily motivated by a need to read about high crimes and misdemeanors, fires, floods, or even whether one’s black sheep first cousin made the police log again, all staples of more routine journalism at larger enterprises. Instead, those who felt the need for local newspapers were concerned about other issues.

They were worried that the history of their towns was being lost: the births, deaths, church picnics, and graduations. They were concerned that the ties binding the communities together were not as strong as in years past. And they thought publishing a newspaper would provide a great opportunity for students, not simply in giving them practice being reporters and writers and seeing their names in print, but for learning the business skills necessary to sell ads and peddle copies of the newspapers when they came rolling off the presses.

And roll off they did: 500 copies in each town, selling for a dollar and even two dollars each.

Ultimately, four of the five Alabama communities decided to publish newspapers: the towns of Camp Hill, Beatrice, Pintlala, and Packers Bend. While Pintlala is largely White, the other towns have majority Black populations. The papers are run by volunteers spanning ages from elementary school and high school to retirees.

At this writing in the fall of 2021, all four communities have published two editions. Sift through the papers and you can sense the pride on the tag lines just underneath the mastheads of the newspapers.

Underneath the banner at the top of page one proclaiming the *Packers Bend Times*, in small type, is the following sentence: “Sharing the stories of our community—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

Under the banner of the *Pintlala Ledger*: “Local people . . . local stories.”

The *Camp Hill Chronicle*: “A voice & source of information for the community.”

The *Beatrice Legacy*: “Opening our community up to itself . . . about us, for us.”

And the stories in the newspapers reflect the one-line mission statements, the promises, if you will, printed on the front pages.



African American residents, many in their Sunday best, line up to vote at the Sugar Shack, Packers Bend, Alabama, May 1966. The Sugar Shack was a convenience store in Wilcox County, Alabama, and became that area's first polling place for African Americans. Many in line were first-time voters as they were casting ballots after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Here is what I have learned from their stories:

That Camp Hill elected a mayor, Messiah Williams Cole, who at 21 is the youngest ever to hold office.

That Lassiter's Hardware in Pintlala is an enterprise more than 100 years old and a place to buy the tools you need and find the odd bolt you might be missing. But it will also leave you, according to the story in the *Pintlala Ledger*, "with a deep soul connection to the core of who you are."

That the PACERS raised-bed garden project in Beatrice, the *Beatrice Legacy* says, feeds people and gives hope, too.

That a convenience store in Wilcox County called the Sugar Shack served as the first African American polling place. In 1966 they stood in line in their Sunday best to cast ballots, according to the *Packers Bend Times*. But the paper didn't just write about it; the editor managed to find a photo. The picture is mesmerizing. It shows more than 20 people in line, and they aren't posing. They are waiting to exercise their democratic right, too long suppressed: ladies in dresses and sensible shoes, purses at their sides; most men wearing suit coats, but one or two in overalls; a few leaning on canes.

Shelton wants to see newspapers

published in four more towns. His vision is to set up an initiative so that any small region that wants to start a paper as a community-building exercise could do so and PACERS would help.

It is a hopeful start. “Social enterprise is what is on our minds. These newspapers mean a great deal to me,” said Shelton. “They have a promise because they are completely community owned and community dependent.”

Local student involvement is important, too. A journalism class has begun in Beatrice with an aim toward allowing the students to be part of the staff. In Pintlala, students in sixth grade may become involved. The office of the *Packers Bend Times* is in the local school.

“The kids do a great job. The schools are important for the papers and the papers are good for the schools,” Shelton said.

A few towns have been surprised to find that the newspapers have sparked interest in former residents who have moved away. Several have become involved in doing stories and serving on staffs from afar.

It will take more than two issues to see how this experiment in community building turns out. And some might think that stories about everyday life are not important, but nothing could be further from



In capturing the big and small happenings of these towns, the residents involved are doing the vital work of democracy. In the process, they will uplift their communities and strengthen the citizenry.

the truth. Stories are what make us human. They live in each one of us. No human culture on the planet is without its stories. And, as one of the editors involved in the PACERS endeavor said, “There’s just as much happening in rural areas as there is in urban areas.”

In capturing the big and small happenings of these towns, the residents involved are doing the vital work of democracy. In the process, they will uplift their communities and strengthen the citizenry. When all is said and done, the world cannot have enough of either. ■

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