

# CRACKS

## IN THE CULTURE OF CONFORMITY

In conservative rural Alberta, newspaper columns provide a forum for critique



By TADZIO RICHARDS

**O**UTSIDE THE BIGGEST CITIES in Alberta, the local newspaper is often the closest thing available to a shared text—something read by most people to find out what’s going on locally and, at times, to spur interpretation of contemporary events. In these communities, professional journalists at the local paper cover what city dailies do not: community events, local sports and decisions by municipal officials. “Community newspapers are still read by 80–85 per cent of residents in the communities they serve,” says Dennis Merrell, executive director of the Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association, which represents 88 member papers with a combined circulation of around 630,000. “If not for the local paper, who will ensure that town and rural councils are held accountable? The paper is often the sole source of reliable information on what’s going on.”

Historically, along with writing local news stories, journalists at rural newspapers also wrote thoughtful,

independent columns that stirred the political pot. That’s never been easy in Alberta. In High River in 1902, journalist and satirist Bob Edwards first published his newspaper the *Eye Opener*. Today the national Bob Edwards Award is given annually to “provocative individuals who are not afraid to speak their minds.” But back then he left town within a year, in 1903, according to his biographer Grant MacEwan, after finding himself on the wrong side of “the town’s two personalities... One, with the sparkle of good champagne, recognized real worth in the man who had been guilty of creating a certain amount of social turmoil; the other, serious and humourless, seemed to resent anything that was unconventional.”

In times of political turmoil, however, columns in rural papers helped sway public opinion. When the Ku Klux Klan brought an ideology of hate to Alberta politics in the 1920s and 1930s, editors at the *Lacombe Western Globe*, the *Vegreville Observer* and the *Drumheller Mail* wrote editorials that

undermined the Klan. “What is more humorous than hearing of a group of full-grown serious-minded men,” wrote Archie Key of the *Mail*, “solemnly conclave in inverted sugar bags and 19th century nightgowns—but the most humorous aspect of the Klan to our mind is the fact that they believe they have a God-given right to regulate public morals, influence local politics and attack any organized faith with which they disagree.”

In 1937 William Aberhart’s Social Credit government brought forward the Accurate News and Information Act—intended to make journalists reveal their sources to the government and require newspapers to print government press releases verbatim. Ninety community papers in Alberta joined with the *Edmonton Journal* in writing sharp editorials and launching a court case that helped kill the Act. For this the *Journal* won a Pulitzer Prize and the community papers were awarded a special Pulitzer certificate for “defense of the freedom of the press” in 1938.

Such pointed local commentary is now rare in rural Alberta. In part this is because of the relentless decline of print newspapers, which across Canada have been cutting staff, amalgamating and even closing under severe financial stress—a situation made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. But the scarcity of critique in the local paper may also be due, perhaps, to newspaper owners afraid to “rock the boat” in places where conservative parties usually win electoral majorities.

SIMON DUCATEL, THE EDITOR OF THE *Sundre Round Up* from 2015 to 2020, has seen the decline of newspapers—and column-writing opportunities—over the course of his career. He graduated from the SAIT journalism program in Calgary and got his first job as a local reporter and semi-regular column writer at the *Vulcan Advocate*, a Postmedia paper, in 2007. “When I started,” he says, “production was in-house, we had a production person doing ads and laying out pages. Within a year that person was gone. Production got outsourced to High River, then centralized into Calgary. It was kind of depressing, all these people losing their jobs around you. That trend didn’t really change when I came out here [to Sundre].”

Sundre (pop. 2,729) is a town in the lower foothills, in Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, a constituency where in 2012 the Wildrose Party and the Progressive Conservatives combined got 92 per cent of the vote. In 2019 the United Conservative Party’s Jason Nixon (now Alberta’s environment minister, who lives near Sundre) won with 81.6 per cent. In this context Ducatel was the sole full-time reporter at the paper. He covered local



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*The Albertan*

news and wrote weekly columns with headlines such as: “Wealth inequality drives poverty”; “Public servants worth investing in”; “Conserving natural resources shouldn’t be controversial” (the title of his column about the need to protect the Bighorn country west of Sundre, a favourite haunt of off-highway-vehicle users); and “Acceleration of climate change [a] legitimate cause for concern.”

“I want to try and provide a different perspective,” he says, when asked about his choice of topics. “I don’t want to contribute to the echo-chamber.”

Local feedback on his columns was both positive and negative, he says, “but I have to give credit to the late Myron Thompson [the former Reform Party MP who was then a Sundre town councillor, retiring in 2017]. He and I butted heads, but for the most part it was amicable. If I wrote an editorial he didn’t like, he didn’t have any qualms about coming into the office and saying, ‘I want to talk to you about this.’ I told him my perspective and he told me his. At the end he’s no longer mad, we shake hands, and we say, ‘Until next time you come in.’ Once in a blue moon he would say, ‘Young man, you hit the nail on the head.’ Which goes to show there’s some hope—you have to be able to have those conversations and start from a place of mutual respect.”

In spring 2020 Great West Media closed five community newspapers, including the *Sundre Round Up*, amalgamating them into a regional paper, *The Albertan*, for which Ducatel remains the Sundre correspondent. One of his last columns was in May of that year, after the UCP tore up the government’s contract with the Alberta Medical Association, and doctors at the Moose and Squirrel clinic in Sundre said the UCP’s new physician funding framework meant they would have to withdraw some medical services. Nixon told local doctors, “Now is not the time for division”—a statement that Ducatel said was “a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black.” The column was online for two hours and then

taken down—a disappearance noted by readers in the rest of Alberta, who briefly made “Ducatel” a trending topic on Twitter.

Ducatel no longer writes columns. “The role of journalism here is to tell people what’s happening in this community, whether it’s town council, or sports, or features on local people. That’s my focus,” he says. “But I miss writing columns and opinion pieces. I definitely didn’t want to stop. I was told my columns weren’t needed anymore [because of] the restructuring.”

The regional paper now publishes a syndicated columnist, the Calgary-based Chris Nelson, whose work also runs across Canada in the *National Post*.

MEDICINE HAT—WHERE DREW BARNES (Cypress-Medicine Hat, Independent) and Michaela Glasgo (Brooks-Medicine Hat, UCP) are the local MLAs—is another conservative jurisdiction where local columnists have drawn attention since the UCP formed government. Scott Schmidt, the layout editor for the *Medicine Hat News*, began writing a weekly column, “Laying It Out,” in September 2019. An early series of columns focused on Premier Jason Kenney’s promise to balance the budget by 2023. “According to the recently released MacKinnon Report, that feat needs to be accomplished in the public sector through attrition, farming out services to the private sector and salary restraint of employees,” wrote Schmidt. On “attrition”—public sector job cuts where the job task doesn’t disappear—he wrote, “The only possible outcome in these situations is having another job (person) absorb new, added work. I mean, really, most of us work in the private sector, which is supposedly more efficient (it’s not, but that’s for another time) and I can’t be the only one around here who has witnessed job elimination followed by extra work, followed by lower morale, followed by decreased quality in product. Am I?”

Along with then-*Medicine Hat News* reporter Jeremy Appel, who also wrote critical columns, including the widely shared “Energy war room an expensive joke at best,” Schmidt got a lot of attention from readers across Alberta, and the paper got a bump in digital subscriptions. Schmidt and Appel also started a podcast, *The Forgotten Corner*, in which they talk to progressive Alberta activists, journalists and politicians. Speaking on the podcast in early 2021 to Jeremy Klaszus, editor of the independent online Calgary news site *The Sprawl* (where Appel is now a reporter), Schmidt mused on the “interesting circumstances” created at the paper by the popularity of the columns. “What do you do when you are a daily newspaper in the conservative epicentre of the most conservative



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**SCOTT SCHMIDT,**  
*Medicine Hat News*

place [in Canada],” he said, “and you’ve got these columnists that go against the grain? What do you do when that’s simultaneously getting complaints and is the most well-read thing by a long shot? It brings in the readers, [but] people don’t phone in to say, ‘I’m keeping my subscription because of Scott.’ They phone in to say, ‘Tell that socialist to fuck off or I’m leaving.’”

In 2021 parent company Alberta Newspaper Group cut the newsroom staff at the *Medicine Hat News* to three full-time reporter positions, the bare bones for the paper in a city of over 63,000 people. Schmidt kept his layout job, and column, but on his podcast he spoke to political blogger David Climenhaga about the cuts. “COVID hit and pretty much everyone got laid off,” he said. “You start really eyeing your own journalistic mortality at that point, especially when you’re two years into writing a column that has guaranteed you’ll never get hired at another newspaper in your life. Like, this is it—if the *Medicine Hat News* is done, I’m pretty sure I’m going to need a new career.”

On February 27, after the UCP delivered the 2021 budget, Schmidt wrote that “slashing the public sector while simultaneously adding record debt” had brought Alberta “[a] big deficit and none of the rewards.... Austerity during recessions is a path to failure.” On May 15 he wrote that the UCP government “is exactly what a Wildrose government would have looked like.”

“A lot of people think I’m doing this because I want the NDP to be in charge,” he says, in a phone interview. “That doesn’t have anything to do with it. This isn’t about partisan politics. It’s about people realizing that our conservative politicians across North America have shifted so far out of whack to the right. And people don’t want that. It wasn’t just COVID that ruined Kenney’s poll numbers. He was crashing before COVID hit. His ideology is bad for people.”



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**BRENDA SCHIMKE,**  
*East Central Alberta Review*



**R**OUGHLY A TWO-HOUR DRIVE due east of Red Deer, in the constituency of Drumheller-Stettler, the town of Coronation (pop. 940), may not be an obvious place to find hope for independent media that feature diverse political voices. In 2012 the Wildrose and the PCs got 93 per cent of the vote between them in Drumheller-Stettler. In 2019 Nate Horner garnered 76.7 per cent of the vote for the UCP. In this context, then, it’s perhaps unexpected to read an editorial on March 20, 2020, in the *East Central Alberta Review*—the riding’s largest paper, published in Coronation—which began: “As Premier Jason Kenney dribbles out budget cuts in dribs and drabs, it intentionally makes it hard for Albertans to realize the cumulative damage he is doing to the soul and fibre of Alberta’s rural communities.”

Other weekly editorials are also surprising, such as the April 27, 2021, edition, “Individuals can’t solve systemic problems,” or the one from February 3 this year, which argued: “COVID-19 showed everyone just how poorly provinces have managed long-term care and the absolute need for national standards under the Canada Health Act.... It also exposed the lie of ‘efficiency’ preached by private sector providers, when, in fact, efficiency is simply cutting staff and lowering standards of care.... ‘Efficient’ is code for siphoning as much taxpayer dollars as possible into shareholder returns.”

Brenda Schimke is the editorial writer at the *East Central Alberta Review*. She was “born and raised in rural Alberta” and, in the latter half of a varied career working in “management or finances or administration” at places such as public and Catholic schools and an oil and gas company, she began writing a column for the paper in the late 1990s. Since then, she’s won three awards from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. “I have a publisher who believes in publishing different opinions, as long as we don’t cross the line of libel and our facts are right,” she says. “My primary interests are public healthcare, public education, long-term care and the environment. If I don’t have something on those topics, I’m [also] passionate about all the misinformation around financial issues. It drives me crazy that the government so misrepresents how equalization payments work.”

Schimke’s column provokes fervent feedback. “Sometimes the [local] comments can be very harsh,” she says, “especially when they come from people I know well—a relative or a long-time friend. But I lick my wounds, and then I go back to the place that differing opinions are critical in a functioning democracy.”

The publisher of the paper, Joyce Webster, says that “differing opinions” are also good for business. Webster bought the independent weekly community newspaper in 1985, when it was the *Coronation Review* and had a print run under 1,000. Today, the renamed *East Central Alberta Review* is both a digital local news site and a print paper that’s distributed free to 27,500 homes in over 90 towns, villages and hamlets from near Red Deer to the Saskatchewan boundary. Webster attributes the growth—an anomaly in the newspaper world—in part to “a niche market out here in east central Alberta,” where agriculture service providers target ads to a large farming population. But she also credits columnists such as Schimke and Herman Schwenk (a local farmer who wrote a conservative-minded column from 2003 until he died in March 2021). The columnists “generate a lot of feedback,” says Webster, “from letters to the editor and whatnot. That’s so important in a community newspaper, to get people to think, to read different views and come to their own conclusions.... I think that’s what grew our strength in readership—because of the columns, we didn’t lean all one way.”

Though revenues initially declined with COVID-19, in 2021 they’ve returned close to pre-pandemic levels and Webster remains optimistic. “I think newspapers will survive,” she says, “because I think social media can’t maintain democracy like newspapers can.”

“That’s probably why I keep writing,” says Schimke. “I’ve been around since the days of Ernest Manning [premier, 1943–1967], and the area I come from only has one viewpoint most of the time. If you’re never exposed to another viewpoint, then we’re going to continue to not have an option to make things better.” ■

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