

## End of an era:

### Bethel paper trades printing past for new technology

By **GERALD GOLDSTEIN** *Providence Journal*

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**Ed Brown removes plates from old letterpress.**

Photo: Russ Dillingham, Lewiston Sun photographer, February 17,



**John Brown operates a linotype machine.**

Photo: Russ Dillingham, Lewiston Sun photographer, February 17, 1985

BETHEL - Etaoin Shrdlu, 99, who for generations put the news into America's newspapers, can't find much work nowadays. And he's about to lose still an-other job — this time at the tiny but pungent Downeast weekly here,

Shrdlu is an imaginary char-acter who symbolized the now -vanishing craft of hot-type printing. He still toils in the ancient, inky composing room of Oxford County's 2,300-circulation Bethel Citizen — but he's been pink-slipped, effective next month.

To the crusty old printers here whose trade is being swallowed by computer technology, Shrdlu personified the Linotype machine — a monolithic, clattering contrivance for typesetting that jammed up on a whim and was apt to set its operator a howl by squirting molten lead on his left leg — the one nearest the melting pot.

The machine was invented in 1886 and if you read the typewriter-like keys across part of its keyboard, you see legendary name: E-t-a-o-i-n S-h-r-d-l-u. Over the past 20 years, the machines were abandoned by all but a handful of newspapers.

But in the dimly lit, cluttered backshop at the eight-page Citizen, a Linotype still transforms the homespun reports of country correspondents into columns of shiny metal type.

What the Linotype casts in metal is printed on the Citizen's rumbling, 1905 vintage letter-press, fed one sheet at a time by the practiced hands of 69-year old Edwin Brown.

It is Thursday morning — paper day — and as Brown watches the press rumble along with the slow, steady wheeze of a steam locomotive, he nods with satisfaction and ventures an opinion on the merits of his reliable old machine.

"It's a corker," he declares.

Brown and two of his brothers, like their father before them, give the news to Bethel — population 2,500. In September, they sold a controlling interest to new publisher Bernie Wideman, who will take the composing room into the 1980s.

Already, a modern phototype-setter waits beneath a plastic dropcloth in the antique composing room — a spacecraft under wraps in a surrey factory.

Why didn't the Browns modernize long ago?

John Brown, who at 55 is the Citizen's editor, Linotype operator, and co-pressman — and who retains a minority interest in ownership — has the answer. He says that his late father, Carl, had no complaints about hot-type printing and that's reason enough.

"After all, he was here for 52 years — you get the feeling that anything he stuck with that long is worth hanging on to," says Brown.

Wideman's problem, though, is that the Browns — who are staying on but are getting older — are just about the only ones in Oxford County who can run the aging equipment. And getting parts for a Linotype machine is only one notch easier than getting parts for a Stanley Steamer.

Wideman says that while typesetting will soon be computerized, the old Linotype will remain in service to help with commercial printing such as posters and letterheads.

The newspaper copy set on Bernie Wideman's new computer will be used to make up pages that will be printed outside the Citizen's backshop, on a modern offset press at the Sun-Journal in Lewiston.

The Browns say that despite their old-fashioned equipment, they have always given Bethel and surrounding villages the important news of small town life — minus the sensationalism of the big city press.

It's homespun, for sure — but that's what a lot of people like, says reader Don Bennett, office manager at the Bethel Inn, in this White Mountain village, where tourism and lumber operations anchor the economy.

There's hardly a soul within 15 miles of Bethel who doesn't get it and read every word in it," he says.

Wideman, 48, who came in last September after three years as editor of the prize-winning Ipswich, Mass., Chronicle, said he had some ideas about changing the format as well as the print-ing equipment, but quickly reversed direction.

"I was used to chasing cops and buttonholing selectmen, and this paper was talking about who helped whom bring in a cord of wood, and what the Boy Scouts were up to — as front page sto-ries. It took me a few weeks to realize that this was a fine re-flection of what was going on in the community," he says.

Another thing about this paper:

It doesn't dwell on the negative, says Musa Brown, the Citizen's bookkeeper, office man-ager, and official greeter.

"Sensationalism — we never use that. Even in obituaries, we don't tell the sordid details, even if we know. People say they like to read the paper because it's refreshing — they don't get the bad things."

The news comes from correspondents like Colista Morgan, who retired from teaching at a one-room schoolhouse. She finds news not only in long lists of items detailing who has called upon whom, but also in the natu-ral beauty of the Maine moun-tains.

After a walk, she tells her readers, "I caught the rattle of a red squirrel, the nasal conversa-tion of nuthatches, and a breeze stirring the beech leaves. . . . Now, as I write this, it is a time of calm reflection; a blossom of lemon color in the sky, across the pond, then turning to a deep orange beyond the hills. Twilight drops into night between one footstep and another."

### **The Bethel Journals**

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