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Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections

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## Archival Chronicle

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March 1992: Volume 11, Number 1

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### The Newspaper: A Community Diary



*Newspapers have brought information on politics, society, and the world to northwest Ohio for over 150 years. The Findlay Minute was one of the smallest ever published in the state.*

Because we rely so heavily on radio, television, and newsmagazines today, we sometimes forget the important role newspapers play in reporting the news and in describing community life. "Dailies" and "weeklies" have documented Ohio since 1793. What was reported and how it was written reflect the community's information and social needs. Understanding how newspapers evolved can help researchers put those resources to the best use.

Before the Civil War, most Ohio newspapers were weeklies. The communities they served were relatively small and often scattered.

Distribution was a serious problem—both in terms of getting the news from the "outside world" and the wider community, and in getting the newspaper out to its readers. Often the person who carried the frontier newspaper brought with him or her the most current community news (or gossip) by word of mouth. The small format (most newspapers were printed on a single sheet of paper, folded once, giving a total of four pages) put space at a premium, so many newspapers devoted most of their space to the printing of legal notices, political editorials, and the full text of major speeches and laws. Social news (one-sentence obituaries, etc.) appeared only as space allowed, often a month after the event. The editor often served as the reporter, typesetter, and printer—solely responsible for what appeared in the paper.

As communities grew larger, the number of newspapers serving them increased, and their content became ever more political. There would be a Democratic newspaper, a Whig (or later, Republican) newspaper, and perhaps an independent newspaper. Editors wielded considerable power within their parties, and maverick elements sometimes started their own newspapers to put their views before the public. Researchers aware of these characteristics will read all available newspapers in a community in order to obtain as complete a picture as possible.

Thanks to the telegraph and railroad, post-Civil War newspapers had much faster access to a wider range of news than ever before. Now an average of eight to twelve pages, the newspapers had space to cover world, national, state, and local stories in a much more timely fashion. More people could read, and if they could not afford books, they could rely on their local paper for feature articles on fashion, homemaking, agricultural methods, jokes, and serialized stories. Community social news became a regular column, but party politics, as always, was the driving force.

*Bowling Green's Sentinel-Tribune began modestly, sharing its building with dry goods stores during the 1880s. CAC general photograph collection.*

After World War I, newspapers achieved the form we recognize today—complete with wire service stories and illustrated with photographs. People in smaller communities began to subscribe to big city dailies for their world, national, and state coverage, leaving local weeklies free to devote themselves entirely to reporting community activities. The Great Depression and the economics of the latter part of this century caused many newspapers to merge or to close down altogether. With only a single newspaper serving the community, readers began to expect more unbiased reporting of political news. Local features and social news became more important than ever.

Just as important as what stories newspapers covered are those they did not. Scandals were often handled very discreetly out of consideration for the family, or simply because "everybody knew" all the details already. Because they were so often the product of a single individual or a small group, newspapers reflect the biases as well as the interests of those people. The politically or socially prominent (often overlapping categories) were usually featured.



People who belonged to political, social, racial, or religious groups different from the editor might receive no newspaper coverage at all, regardless of their population strength in the community. Responding to the needs of those readers were newspapers produced by and for ethnic, minority, or other special interest groups. Among those available at the CAC are newspapers in German, Polish, and Hungarian, newspapers serving the Black community of Lima, and publications of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant denominations, all contributing to a more complete understanding of their entire community's life. Researchers should also be aware that they bring modern historical perspectives to their work, and that what seems important to us today may not have seemed so to people in the midst of history in the making.

Despite their limitations, newspapers are one of the most useful basic resources for historical research of all kinds—in politics, genealogy, and social history. Few other resources have the breadth of community coverage over an extended period of time.

—Lee N. McLaird

## Newspapers at the CAC



*Linotype operators like this man at the Toledo Blade cast type for American newspapers well into the 1960s. Today computers handle the process. CAC general photograph collection.*

Nearly fifty northwest Ohio newspapers donate subscriptions to the Center for Archival Collections' newspaper preservation program. At regular intervals, each newspaper is checked for completeness and many are microfilmed. A security negative is filed and a use copy is made for researchers at the CAC. Additional copies can be made should the use copy become damaged, and copies can be purchased by interested libraries and researchers. Still other preservation projects have been initiated with local libraries, historical societies, publishers and private individuals. The CAC welcomes such microfilming projects and encourages interested persons and groups to contact us for more detailed information.

The CAC is also participating in the Ohio Newspaper Project, an effort sponsored by the Ohio Historical Society to identify and locate existing copies of all newspapers published in Ohio. Part of a nationwide task the project will produce a complete list of newspapers held in institutions throughout the state. Ultimately, it is hoped that the newspapers can be microfilmed, so that future researchers will have access to the most complete runs possible.

Over 650 newspaper titles currently are available to researchers at the CAC, either on microfilm or in original format. Journalism students, historians, and genealogists consult them daily for the wealth of information they contain. Acquisitions are updated on the CAC's [Newsblog](#).

## Robert Peters Collection Opens with Gala Reception

The opening of an important new research collection in the Rare Books Division was marked by an exhibit and reception on February 13, 1992. A variety of books, broadsides, artwork, and manuscripts from the Robert Peters Collection of Contemporary Poetry (MS 626) were on exhibit in the Jerome Library conference room. Noted poet and critic Robert Peters spoke on the contemporary poetry scene to a gathering of friends, alumni, and staff.

After thirty years of teaching at the University of California at Irvine, Robert Peters is best known for such works of poetry as *Hawker*, *Shaker Light*, *Ludwig of Bavaria*, and *The Blood Countess*. His recent autobiography *Crunching Gravel* was praised by both the *New York* and *Los Angeles Times* for its clarity of vision and lack of sentimentality. Not content to let his words stand only on the page, Peters has adapted *Ludwig of Bavaria*, *The Blood Countess*, and other works for the stage and performed them around the country.

Also influential as a critic, Peters has edited the *Poets Now* series for Scarecrow Press, and his reviews have appeared in such publications as *American Book Review*, *Library Journal*, and *American Poetry Review*. Gathered into *The Great American Poetry Bake-off* and *Peters' Black and Blue Guides to Current Literary Journals*, his sometimes acerbic reviews demand a poet's best work in facing the difficult world of our day.

Peters assembled this outstanding collection of poetry books, most published since 1970, in the course of his work as critic and teacher. Over 4500 published materials show the range and vitality of the contemporary poetry scene. Small presses and literary journals are represented, as well as large publishers. The manuscript collection is especially outstanding for the 650 letters to and from practicing poets, discussing poetry and publishing; the 200 individual reviews by Peters, and well over 200 manuscripts of work in progress by other poets. The collection effectively doubles the poetry holdings of the Rare Books and Special Collections Division, which now holds one of the premiere collections of late twentieth century poetry in the nation.

Of special pride to BGSU's Creative Writing Program are the number of program graduates represented in the collection. Over the course of the following weekend, Peters gave readings and met in workshops with program alumni and students at their semi-annual meeting.

--Lee N. McLaird

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**THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE illustrate the newspaper trade and some of the printed resources available to researchers at the Center for Archival Collections.**

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