

Jon, Jim and Jamie Nesbitt in the *Bulletin* press room.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

In a sea of newspaper leviathans, the Nesbitts have kept the Brooks Bulletin afloat for nine decades

by Tamara Stecyk

Walk into the office of *Brooks Bulletin* manager Jon Nesbitt any weekday morning at half past nine and you never know who you'll find having coffee with him. It could be Alliance MP Monte Solberg, Brooks Mayor Don Weisbeck or the manager of the local radio station. But it's just as likely to be a local oilman or worker at the regional landfill. While Jon gleans tidbits of community gossip during these coffee conversations, his brother, Jamie Nesbitt Jr., the weekly newspaper's editor, is checking in with his two reporters. As deadline approaches phones ring constantly and fingers type hurriedly.

A *Bulletin* reporter from 1997 to 2001, I empathize with the staffers in the newsroom. The paper is published every Wednesday and I always became more frantic when a major story broke on a Monday or a Tuesday. But whether it was the searchers looking for a kidnapped four-year-old Brooks girl or the local performing on Broadway during the September 11 terrorist attacks, Jamie and Jon always seemed to know who to call to make a story. The brothers are a rare breed in the world of weekly newspapers—

they've helped keep the *Bulletin* in their family for nearly a century.

Independently owned weeklies in Alberta are as uncommon as the Nesbitts themselves. Chains, both large and small, own a majority of the province's more than 100 weekly papers; Bowes Publishers (part of the Sun Media company) has more than 30, while St. Albert-based Great West owns about a dozen. Nonetheless, by staying in the black, maintaining a community presence, adapting to the times and adding a free weekend tabloid in early 2004, the *Bulletin* has managed to remain independent since the first issue hit the streets 94 years ago.

"There are not that many independents left," says Jon, whose grandfather, Leonard D. Nesbitt, purchased the newspaper from founder Calvin Goss for \$500 in 1912. Jon has been working full time for the *Bulletin* since 1976, when he and Jamie returned to Brooks from various school and work sojourns. "At the time, there were a lot of newspapers being bought up by the big guys and I wanted to make sure there was something left for the family," Jon says. "Because we are

a family-owned newspaper that has been here for many years,” Jamie adds, “I think we have a better understanding of the issues affecting this community.” Both Jamie, 51, and Jon, 49, talk to residents frequently and over the years have been involved in organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Kinsmen Club. “I think the chains try to get their editors and publishers to be an integral part of the communities,” says Jon, “but we have the advantage of not starting fresh. We know the people.”

Thumb through a typical issue of the broadsheet and you’ll read about town council meetings, immigration to

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the area, housing projects, commercial development, the cattle industry and the packing plant that are among the town’s main employers. With more than two dozen occasional correspondents living in the villages and towns around Brooks, the *Bulletin* also features folksy accounts of birthdays, anniversaries, funerals and stories about oversized potatoes or pumpkins—humble copy, perhaps, but stories readers can relate to. And it’s not that humble: the *Bulletin* has won awards for its news and feature reporting as well as its front-page design from the Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association. When publisher Jim Nesbitt Sr., Jon’s and Jamie’s father, took over from his older brother Clive in 1954, he made sure there were light-hearted stories among the heavier news. “You don’t want to read about gory accidents,” advises Jim, 88, who semi-retired in 1982. “Leave that to the daily press.”

The Nesbitts also leave the bottom-line approach to staffing to the dailies and the chains. Most of the *Bulletin*’s 12 full-time and 14 part-time employees have been with the paper for more than a decade. “We treat them more or less like family. We don’t have to answer to a big corporation somewhere about why sales are down or if we can cut staff here,” says Jon. “We believe if you hire someone and if they are there for the long term, they will get to know the community,” adds Jamie, “and that always makes for a better relationship that the newspaper has in the community. I know publishers who work for chains and the budget is first and foremost in their minds. We have the latitude and the flexibility to meet demands on our own schedule. Thank God, we are profitable.”

Patricia Bell, head of the University of Regina’s journalism school, agrees with this interpretation. Because chains manage the budgets of individual papers, they control the number of reporters and the workload of editors, which determines how stretched and stressed people are. “Control of the money does control the kinds of stories that the papers are able to tackle,” Bell says. An independent paper, on the other hand, can choose to put resources into one particular investigation,


she says. “They have more flexibility to respond to what their particular community wants and needs.”

SERVING 22,000 PEOPLE IN BROOKS and the surrounding County of Newell, today’s *Bulletin* has a paid circulation of 5,000. The paper was founded in 1910. Leonard D. Nesbitt bought the business in 1912 and sold it to his brother Howard in 1920. A partnership purchased the paper in 1930, but the *Bulletin* returned to the family when Clive took over in 1935. When Jim became publisher in 1954, he invested in equipment and increased advertising rates to keep the paper afloat. “I paid a lot of attention to what my contemporaries were doing,” he says. “We knew offset [printing] was coming. The idea was not to jump into it or you could get the wrong equipment.”

In the past seven years, however, the Nesbitts have invested heavily in computers and digital cameras and spent \$150,000 to upgrade their press. The *Brooks and County Chronicle*, the first serious competition for local advertising, is one of the main reasons. (Two previous attempts to start another weekly paper had failed.) Prior to the arrival of the *Chronicle*, the *Bulletin* was printed in black and white with occasional spot colour. Once the *Chronicle* was introduced as a free, independent weekly (initially called *The Paper*) in 1996, the *Bulletin* realized its advertisers wanted colour.

That the *Bulletin* has maintained its readership in the face of a free competitor means people are willing to pay for their community news, according to Brooks resident Alison Ortwein. “You develop relationships with the people who are writing the news stories,” she says. “If you want to get a sense of what is happening here, you need to buy the *Bulletin*.” Ron Brandt, a resident for 40 years, feels continuity is important. “It is a good newspaper from what I have seen going to other towns and villages,” he says. “I would hate to see someone from down East take over the paper and not have the connections to the town.”

Weeklies that lose touch with the rhythm of their home communities can be “deadly boring,” says Bell. If all they have is the support of local advertisers, not local people, there’s no meat. “It’s like a lot of places in rural Canada,” says Bell. “Some are able to revitalize and I think a weekly newspaper has a huge role to play in making that happen. If it is an independent, it is so involved *itself* in survival.” Which often means a willingness to reinvent itself and ask tough questions—questions a chain-owned paper will not pose.

The Nesbitt brothers plan to run the *Bulletin* for at least 15 more years. They do have a standing offer to sell to a media chain, but they want to keep the business in the family as long as they can. After all, one of Jim’s nine grandchildren may decide to keep their heritage alive. “We’re not going anywhere,” says Jamie, “until we decide perhaps for all of us it’s time to retire.” 

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