

Last run for the presses

The Courier Journal's printing presses to fall silent after 153 years

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It was close to midnight May 14, 1988. The Courier Journal's editor in charge had already put the paper to bed.

Four floors below the newsroom, ribbons of newsprint were racing through two stories of thundering metal presses. Semi-trailer trucks waited to make deliveries across the state. Then, the phone rang. The caller had a tip about a fiery, head-on church bus collision near Carrollton, Kentucky. The bus was full of kids.

Editor Marie Geary knew what she had to do.

"We made phone calls to police and hospitals and pulled together the nojumper," a front-page story that didn't "jump" to an inside page, Geary recalled. "I stopped the presses the minute I knew we had a story to ship to composing, then to engraving, for the new front page.

Downstairs, Phil White was among the blue-clad press journeymen who scrambled to fasten new page plates to the giant rollers as the morning drew closer.

Finally, a bell rang as the presses whirred back to life. Operators cranked the 1940s printing press to its limits, coaxing it like jockeys down the stretch.

"We ran those presses wide-open," White said. "It took us all night."

When The Courier Journal hit doorsteps the next morning, it was the only paper to have the story. It marked the start of the paper's Pulitzer-winning investigation into one of the nation's deadliest crashes.

For 153 years, generations of skilled Courier Journal press operators have inked the first draft of history onto newsprint in the dead of night, come hell or high water.

That legacy will end Sunday night when the newspaper's printing presses make their last run before falling permanently silent.

Starting Monday, The Courier Journal will be printed and trucked in from Indianapolis. Its current printing presses, opened in 2004, will be closed and dismantled.

"It's the end of an era," News Director Mike Trautmann said. "But make no mistake, The Courier Journal is here to stay — just as it has been the past 153 years. Our staff is part of the community, and we will continue telling the stories that are important to Louisville and Kentucky.

"We're not going anywhere."

America's shrinking print legacy

The shutdown is part of a growing, industry-wide printing-press consolidation as readers and advertisers increasingly move online.

Printed circulation and its ad dollars have dwindled, even as The Courier Journal's digital journalism has climbed to 4.5 million monthly visitors.

In recent years, those same trends have brought the Cincinnati Enquirer, the Lexington Herald-Leader, the Bowling Green Daily News and other newspapers to The Courier Journal's presses for printing.

But the financial fallout from the pandemic has only added strain. Presses have closed from Philadelphia to Palm Springs.

Now, it's Louisville's turn.

The loss of 102 press, mailroom and transportation jobs with the shutdown also marks the ebbing of a long-proud craft. Across the country, newspaper and periodical printing press jobs declined by 34% between 2016 and 2019, federal statistics show. For some career press operators, who saw technology change over the decades from lead type to lasers, it was like printing a new page of history day after day.

And it meant serving as the unseen link between the news and readers to make what some like to call the small miracle of a daily newspaper.

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to be crying,” said John Bailey, 60, who started in 1978 and will watch the three Koenig and Bauer AG Colora presses make their last run Sunday night. “I like putting ink on paper, especially when it’s news.”

Working on the presses

In the break room of The Courier Journal’s 135,000-square-foot press building on a recent night, a handful of operators were finishing nighttime lunch.

On the wall hung a weekly pressroom schedule from 2001, with 41 press operators and eight apprentices and utility workers, next to a current schedule with less than half that number.

Beyond the windows, the three presses combine into a colossus that reaches four stories high. It was already vibrating and humming, its cylinders stained with magenta and cyan ink.

Taut lines of newsprint rocketed up from giant basement spools. A night’s work typically means not just a newspaper, but Sunday advertising inserts and other jobs.

“Hey Potter, is that plate ready?” Charles Mitchell, a supervisor, called out.

By 9:30 p.m., The Courier Journal’s stories — some of which began that morning with a phone call or a tip, continued through a day of furious reporting, writing and editing — had been collected and designed onto digital newspaper pages.

Workers fed thin anodized aluminum sheets through one of three long imaging machines, which used lasers to burn images of the pages. They traveled through a bluish chemical bath before being folded to clip into the presses’ cylinders.

“When I started, we used film negative to burn the image onto the plate. Before that, they had lead plates. The composing room back in the heyday had 200 employees,” Bailey said. “Today there are none. It’s computer to plate. You hit ‘Send’ and in eight minutes you have a plate out.”

Mitchell bounded up metal ladders and ducked between ink-colored rollers. A fellow worker affixed those plates to cylinders — careful to get the right angle and set — that would transfer ink to a rubber mat and then to the paper.

For years, press operators, who remain mostly men, started as “flyboys,” grunts who carried ink and hauled waste before becoming an apprentice. They learned to mix ink and set plates before becoming a press journeyman who knew how to avoid jams and quickly fix problems.

On this night, newsprint rolls are kept at the press’ lowest reaches. They can weigh 2,000 pounds, and the paper is kept moist by wall misters as it’s fed by machines into spools.

A floor up, press operators sat at desks that looked like they belonged in a spaceship, with computer screens monitoring the run, the pages, alignment and print quality.

Mistakes can be costly, but the veteran crew is cool as could be.

‘Everything came to life’

By 10:30 p.m., the next day's paper was rocketing through spools and rollers, collecting different colors as they passed.

They slipped through machines that folded and cut them with a rapid staccato chopping, the newspaper equivalent of sawdust clinging to machines.

Then they flew on snaking lines of ceiling-mounted grippers into the vast mailroom, a warehouse of sorters, spiral chutes and employees who get the comics and Sunday inserts into papers before they're moved to a bay to be loaded into trucks.

The paper's "off time," the time they need to have finished printing, juggled with other printing jobs, is after 1 a.m. But they're usually done well before that time because of a shrinking number of printed editions.

By Sunday, only The Courier Journal will be left to print here. Others, from the New York Times to Cow Country magazine, will have moved elsewhere.

Mitchell pulled off a copy, headlined by The Courier Journal's iconic oldschool banner. He eyeballed the color and alignment, checking for anything that looked off.

Craning his head upward, he said he was hooked the first time he saw a press in action in Detroit in the 1980s, gearing up to print 1.2 million copies of the Detroit Free Press and Detroit News.

"I remember watching it speed up. Everything came to life," he said. "I was just blown away."

Working under an ink mist

For Mitchell, it started at age 26. While working part-time at a gas station to earn extra money, a Gannett newspaper executive offered him a job after getting to know him while twice helping fix a flat tire.

"I started in the basement. I got moved upstairs. I learned how to set black ink. Then, they cut me loose on spot colors. For some reason, I could set good color," he said.

"That opened the door and I got to run my own press."

For fellow operator Don True, 61, it might have been his visit to the presses during an elementary tour of the newspaper in the 1960s. He marveled at press operators "putting plates on, taking them off, running, checking the paper, seeing if it all looked right."

For Bailey, whose father

worked at the old Courier Journal presses in 1959, his 1978 job was meant as a temporary gig to augment a baseball scholarship for college.

But he stayed on when he was asked to become an apprentice and never looked back.

"I started in 1978, two days before Thanksgiving. That's our biggest time of the year. Thanksgiving and Derby Week. Back then Sunday circulation was 398,000. We were so busy, loading roll after roll after roll," he said.

By contrast, he said, print circulation is now down to barely 60,000.

It was also a dirty job back then, he said.

"We worked under an ink mist until the early 80s. You went home and you almost looked like a coal miner. You were blowing it out of your nose and coughing it up," he said, noting that's long been improved.

When the Bingham family owned the paper, before it was sold to Gannett Co. Inc. in 1986, Bailey recalled mustachioed Publisher Barry Bingham Jr. walking into the

presses in overalls to learn about the machines or talk with operators about any work concerns.

Sometimes, they'd run up to the newsroom to see wire-service printers hammer out breaking news such as a Pete Rose baseball hitting streak, or rush into the break area to watch news on television, knowing they would be a part of delivering it to readers.

"You knew the big story before the paper got out. Before the neighbors did. It was kinda cool," True said.

White said he was working the presses when he noticed an odd sight on the front page — his wife. She'd been photographed filling out a job application at the local Ford Truck plant.

He brought papers home and hung them in the house to surprise her.

Tragedy struck in 1989 at the adjoining Standard Gravure plant, which printed the newspaper's Sunday magazine and Parade. Joseph Wesbecker, a press operator on leave, walked into the building with an AK-47 and killed eight people before killing himself.

Standard Gravure would close three years later, after two fires, and has been replaced by a parking lot behind The Courier Journal building.

Press operators said many times they had to wait or replate the presses for big news, from the Iranian hostage crisis to the 2000 disputed presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore to Muhammad Ali's death in 2016.

In that case, the paper confirmed the death and filed the story just moments before the final deadline to get it in the next day's paper.

Former Courier Journal Managing Editor Ben Post recalled once having to rush back from the S & H Bar bar across the street to stop the presses when two Catholic popes, Paul VI and his successor, John Paul I, died in the same year.

"Times change," Post wrote in an email, explaining that while a story could now go online, "it is not like getting a screaming stripped story on your doorstep the next day."

In 2004, The Courier Journal opened a new, German-built state-of-the-art press at a cost of more than \$80 million. It replaced the 1940s-era presses, adding more color and nearly doubling its speed.

German engineers spent nearly a year on site getting the bugs worked out.

"We have moved from 1948 to 2004 in one day," former publisher Ed Manassah said at the time.

But it wasn't long before the Great Recession and changing reader habits began to erode the fortunes of newspapers. Print ad revenue declined, and with it the number of pages in the newspaper.

Facebook and Google gobbled up digital ad revenue. Over the years, The Courier Journal endured bureau closures, staff cuts, the elimination of standalone newspaper sections such as business and travel and halted separate Kentucky and Indiana editions.

At the newspaper, the waiting semitrucks became smaller box trucks, even as other papers shifted to Louisville for their shrinking print jobs.

"It's not like we're special — papers are dropping presses all over the country. We thought we'd be the last one standing," said Bailey, who is among the operators represented by the Teamsters.

“It was a good living. It helped my kids grow up, kept me in a house and a car. “

Telling stories that make a difference

At one end of the printing press, large bins are full of used printing plates for recycling into a new day's news. But after next week, the entire press could be recycled.

White will stay on to lead the decommissioning, removing the large containers of colored ink, chemicals and removing equipment. He said it could be moved to other sites, sold or scrapped.

The loss of local printing isn't expected to affect early morning paper delivery for subscribers, top editors say.

But it will mean earlier story deadlines for the next day's paper, which will affect late afternoon and nighttime events such as sports and local and state meetings and hearings.

Trautmann said the staff has already begun making adjustments to ensure the printed newspaper remains fresh and relevant, with an emphasis on enterprise and watchdog stories that focus less on the “what” and more on the “how” and “why.”

It's the same formula that earned The Courier Journal its 11th Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for its coverage of former Gov. Matt Bevin's controversial 11th-hour pardons.

“We're still breaking news, we're just doing it online,” Trautmann said. “We sometimes update and republish a news story a dozen times on the internet before we publish it in print.

“But at its heart, our journalism hasn't changed. We're telling stories that make a difference in people's lives and holding the powerful to account.”

On Sunday, press operators plan to order pizza, welcome back some retirees or those not on shift that night, and watch the presses rumble to life for the last time.

They'll be joined by a handful of reporters and editors eager to catch a glimpse of the end of an era.

Mitchell, who has collected plates from historic front pages over the years, will hand out some final run plates. Some press workers are moving to Indianapolis, others are looking for a new chapter in what several said is a dying art.

But one that has served the community time and again — delivering newspapers to people's doorsteps through fires and floods.

“It's been our lifeblood,” White said.

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