

THE ARGUS: BENTON'S WEEKLY PAPER

INTRODUCTION: Ted Fenstermacher, author of "The Argus: Benton's Weekly Paper," that appeared in the Bloomsburg newspaper, *Press Enterprise*, on July 16, 1984, was the long time editor of the *Berwick Enterprise*. In his so called retirement, he wrote a weekly column on various local historical subjects. Many of these appeared in his two books, *Tracking Yesterday* and *More Tracking Yesterday*, published in 1983 and 1984.

The Argus was one of several Columbia County weekly newspapers published in Bloomsburg, Berwick, Catawissa, Centralia, and Millville. The 1800s and early 1900s is the time that weekly newspapers were most common. The Brewington family had a long association with *The Argus* beginning in 1901 until February 27, 1969, when *The Morning Press* purchased it. At the end of June in the same year, it ceased publication as the last weekly in Columbia County.

Fenstermacher describes the kind of articles and advertisements found in an 1894 issue of *The Argus*. For example, he cited an ad for McHenry Whiskey touting its medicinal value. In reading his article one can easily see why the author found weekly newspapers fascinating as well as providing a feel for the time period.

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For about six decades, the *Argus*, a weekly newspaper published in Benton, was to be found in a majority of homes in that area. For most of those years, a paper known as *The Mountain Echo* held a similar place of importance in the Shickshinny area.

More about *The Mountain Echo* and of other weeklies of years ago in area communities later but this TV column will be devoted to the Benton paper. That is thanks to Jan Reichard, Orangeville R.D.2, who has loaned me a number of rare, old copies of that paper.

For years, we had been readers of the *Argus*. The late Bob Brewington, who for many years was the editor and publisher, was a personal friend and about once a week would stop in at the *Enterprise* offices.

He had succeeded his father, Percy Brewington who had earlier succeeded W. H. Smith in the editor-publisher post. After Bob's death his brother, John, conducted the paper for some years. During many of those years, the late Martin Appleman was active there. My wife, Mae, was a Linotype operator at the Boyles Print Shop before becoming a proof-reader for the *Enterprise* and each big game season would work at *The Argus* while John was hunting. So, you can see, we were not strangers to *The Argus*.

Weekly papers always fascinated us. Perhaps much of the fascination was that, while working on a daily, it was pleasant to think of having only one deadline per week. But, on the other hand, job printing made up a considerable part of the work at a weekly and that in itself can be a real hassle.

The papers loaned to me by Reichard include one from 1894. And, believe me, I have really enjoyed perusing those papers. An interesting angle is that although things in general were more peaceful - and sensible - then, they also had problems in

those late 1800 years. Drunkenness, crookedness and failure to "do the right thing" were common even then.

Both news and advertisements in the old paper are interesting – even fascinating in many cases. For example, the Rohr McHenry and Son distillery was smaller than it was to become, but even in 1894 was big for those days.

The McHenry ad commented that the firm's "strictly pure rye whiskey" was "double distilled in a copper lined doubler, from thoroughly cleaned rye and pure spring water" and was being turned out at 100 gallons a day. A \$500 reward was offered for "any corn or drugs found in our whiskey as it leaves our salesroom." And, like so many hucksteering on TV today, the ad claimed that the drink "is recommended by all the leading physicians" for medical purposes. .

The ads show the Boody Marble Works at Rupert was a big deal then. J. M. Kline, Main Street, Benton, plugged the Standard Sewing Machine, claiming, "the rotary shuttle does it."

For room stoves, it was B. G. Keller, Benton, who claimed to handle all the best. Ditto for kitchen stoves, roofing and spouting. (No use putting all the eggs in one basket).

W. R. Hazlett, of Cambra, had a clever gimmick. For every \$15 worth of furniture, bought for cash, a customer was entitled to "a fine crayon portrait of anyone you may choose." The Benton Planning Mills, R.T. Smith, proprietor, had a large ad.

Alfred McHenry, Benton, had a clothing ad on the "Dissolution of partnership Sale of J. M Gidding & Co., successors to Gidding and Salsburg," clothiers of Bloomsburg.

The Snyder lit Magee Co., Limited, Fourth and Market streets, Bloomsburg, sold everything from groceries to furniture. There was also furniture available at the Isaiah Raber store at Stillwater and in addition, Raber advertised: "Having purchased the entire undertaking outfit of Bruce Carey, of Cambra, I am fully prepared to carry on undertakings in all its branches. Embalming and body preserving fully attended to."

The Benton Milling Co. was buying grain and selling flour. Thomas H. Carey operated the Benton Drug Store. Pianos, organs and sewing machines were' offered by J. Saltzer, Bloomsburg.

"Professional Cards" included: E. L. Lemmon, farm sales, at Asbury; Dr. G. P. Fritz, dentist" Benton; J. A. Howard; auctioneer, Millville; George Aurand's Central Hotel, Bloomsburg; Lemuel Drake's Orangeville Hotel; Kline and Kelchner's Exchange Hotel in Benton; L. B. Howell's City Hotel in Jamison City; the McHenry House in Benton; George Crosley's Benton Hotel; and W. S. Fleckenstine's City Hotel in Bloomsburg.

Benton's medical doctors included T. H. Carrey and J. Bruce Hess. The town had the millinery shops of Mrs. R. A. Carmon and M. E. and J. R. Fullmer. Tintypes and other photos were available at the Benton photo shop of H. A. Kemp.

Of course there was news in the paper too - principally dozens of one sentence stories, many dealing with citizens who had pneumonia, scarlet fever, etc.

One report said, "I believe the foot bridge at Forks is completed. It will be quite convenient for people to get to the post office and railroad station. "

One story was, "Preston Traxler, of Rohrsburg, has gone west."

Considerable space was given to the Farmers' Institute to be held at the Court House with a special train to be run from Benton by the Bloomsburg and Sullivan each morning - returning at night.

Another big event was the county convention of the Patriotic Order Sons of America, an influential lodge in earlier years.

A shyster was traveling the rural areas, getting signatures on what he claimed were "permits to post signs on barns," for which he paid \$2.

Later, the farmers were astonished to learn each had signed a note for \$200. And they had to pay when payment was demanded.

The editor told, in sharp manner, what he thought of an uneducated Bradford County man who "set to work and courted a school marm for two years during which she taught him." Then "he gave her the shake and went to practicing law."

Another note by the editor: "Have the people of Benton forgotten the life-size crayon portrait canvassers that visited here two years ago and secured a good many half-dollars for pictures that never came? Well, another lot of such fellows are now headed this way."

Another warning was, "Persons should beware of \$2 counterfeit bills now being put in circulation. The bills are somewhat crumpled up so as to make the detection somewhat harder. They are Series B, 1891, and numbered 1,207,405."

A marriage that probably had the town talking was in the 1894 paper. "Miss Martha Findley and A. C. Kauffman never saw each other until last Thursday, at Lock Haven, and an hour later they were married. The bride just arrived from Vassar, Mich., and is 26 years old. The groom resides at Millhall, Centre County, and is 65. They had courted through the mails."

Well, some of the ads and items may not seem too important now but they were then, and they made good reading for the subscribers.

A jog to the memory of anyone who might be in arrears in paying his subscription was given too. The editor asked "Does this fit you?" and suggested it be sung to the tune of "The Old Oaken Bucket." It read:

"How dear to our hearts is
Cash on subscription,
When the generous subscriber
Presents it to view;
But the man who don't pay -
We refrain from description,
For perhaps, gentle reader,
That man may be you."