

Editor Prince and The Newton Record

From a memoir in the centennial edition of the Record 2010
By Kent Prince

Winner Prince was editor and publisher of The Newton Record from 1937-72. He took the reins from his wife's father, W.C. Mabry, who bought the paper in 1926 and needed someone to take over publication after he became postmaster. The Record was a family operation: Annie Rose Mabry ran the front office; Lorene Mabry Prince wrote great chunks of the copy.

Lorene would sit at home at the kitchen table, using a pencil and yellow pulp paper. She could whip out a column of editorials and editor's notes, with an account of a wedding or two, in one short session. Her pencil would fly over the pages, abbreviating and contracting at random, with an easy but concentrated facility that rendered the first draft final.

Often after lunch, Winner would sit across the table and dictate suggested commentary on the burning topic du jour. Sometimes it was a struggle, finding the right words, exactly expressing the right sentiment — especially when the topic was political. Then the sheets would go back down the hill to the office where Annie Rose could type them up for the Linotype operators.

Lorene's handwriting was as legible as her prose was clear and her thinking straight-forward. It was simple transcription for Annie Rose to type it up. Dealing with the community correspondents, on the other hand, presented a greater challenge. The columns chronicling life in the country came in all varieties — some just illegible scribbles, gathered on scraps of paper that showed utter disregard for the editor's provisions of writing materials.

Winner and Lorene believed the purpose of a newspaper was to instruct and lead, especially morally. Public service was the point. (Unless, of course, they were offering to barter for a pail of scuppernongs. Or were making a comment on their grandson. As Winner joked, what good is it to have a newspaper if you can't put your grandson's picture in it?)

W.K. Prince was totally comfortable leaning against a wall, shoulder to shoulder with politicians like J.P. Coleman, John Stennis, William Winter or Bill Waller. He viewed it his obligation to weigh the merits of candidates and offer his recommendation to the reader. As editor of a small-town weekly, he exchanged informed insights with at least three governors, one congressman and a U.S. senator. These luminaries were all the more remarkable considering the large number of losing politicians he supported with good cheer. One of the best times he ever had was serving squirrel stew to J.P. Coleman and selected guests.

In a town where it was not always easy to be at odds with your neighbor, everybody knew where the Princes stood — which is why it was such a good joke the day the other side hired Little Prince to distribute fliers for a Ross Barnett rally. Ross was high on the list of politicians Winner did not recommend.

It was through this sense of community that Winner won appointment to the state A&I board, which led to a trip to Michigan to talk to a manufacturer about opening a satellite plant in Mississippi. He had, of course, a certain prejudice toward the advantages of locating in Newton, which was ideally intersected by two highways and two rail lines. Once during the

courtship an extra suitcase, packed full of fresh peaches, each carefully wrapped and cushioned individually, went along to sweeten the deal for company president Edward M. Knabusch. How could anybody argue with that? La-Z-Boy expanded south and the town has been enjoying the harvest ever since.

He was also a member of the board of Newton's second bank and an official with the government's Regional Housing Authority, for which he signed checks and approved payments. A Yellow Dog Democrat — he joked he'd vote for a yellow dog before he'd vote for a Republican — he held various party offices and at one point turned down a chance to serve as county party chairman. As an election commissioner, he was the one who drove back roads from precinct to precinct the day before elections to deliver ballot boxes.

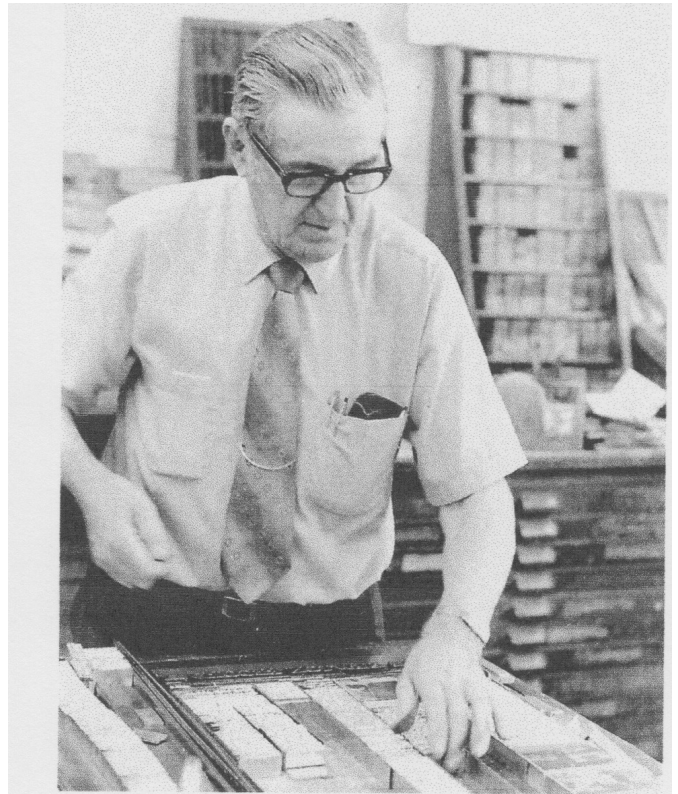
In later years, when Little Prince wasn't Little any more and could work at the Record after school, Lorene moved down to the office where she employed the old standup writing desk for her composition three days a week. It was a wonderful piece of furniture of the sort no longer used in these days of personal computers. Waist high, supported by elephantine legs turned out of four-by-fours, it had a slanted top, the perfect height for handwriting, with ample room for notes and reference books.

The Prince house sat across the street from the funeral home, which had the only ambulance in town. The sudden scream of the siren in the middle of the night would propel father and son into a break-neck chase down the highway in pursuit of news.

There was no yellow police tape back then. Camera in hand, the news duo would be right up front as the highway patrol worked the scene.

There were obvious lessons for a young reporter: look what can happen to a fellow who scrapes 30 or 40 yards down the pavement under his motorcycle. Look how a scrap of bloody skin will snag on a broken windshield and blow in the wind like a thistle. One night editor and son, with a crowd drawn by a calamity, stood around the naked corpse in the embalming room. The conversation might as well have been at Shorty's barber shop.

In 1948, a Friday the 13th tornado killed 10 people south of town. You could hear the roar over the driving rain. As the air turned green in that eerie tornado light, Lorene couldn't hide her terror, try as she would. The next day the family went out to get a report on the damage



Editor Prince

Winner Prince, wearing a dress shirt and tie despite the ubiquitous printer's ink, arranges a galley of metal type in a page form for The Newton Record.

— trees down, sheets of tin roofing twisted around limbs.... But the trip was cut short when Little Prince fell in a creek even as Winner was warning about being careful.

The back shop was a dirty place with all that printer's ink. The canvas work aprons, with skinny pockets for the pica pole measuring sticks, didn't stop the ink from jumping off every flat surface and bespoiling passersby. Editor Prince spent about as much time hands-on in the back shop as he did in the front office or on the street trolling for advertisers and news. The difference was that he wore outside clothes, usually a dress shirt and tie, even when working with dirty type. It was a mystery how he could make up pages without getting inked. (He did not, however, wear his trademark straw katy inside.)

Deadlines were unending, but once a year the family found the leisure for a three or four-day vacation -- a long weekend at the Mississippi Press Association which always convened at the Buena Vista Hotel on the beach in Biloxi. There was no leaving until the paper was out, and invariably some breakdown would delay the press run and postpone the departure, but the trip was an annual reward.

The drive to the coast was hazardous. Cattle wandered freely out onto the highway in the fenceless open range south of Hattiesburg. It would send Winner into apoplexy, and Lorene would sit tight-lipped and silent while a white-faced bull stared down the car trespassing in his lane. There seemed no logic in owners leaving livestock in certain peril. But under the law back then it was the driver's fault if he hit one, which still doesn't make any sense at all.

It was a working vacation and a chance to pick up the usual armful of prizes in the annual newspaper competition. Not just newspaper prizes: Winner lived up to his name. He always came home with a door prize — a Polaroid camera, a backyard grill, a gas light for the yard. One editor was overheard snarking good-naturedly, "Let's just let them draw Winner's prize, then we'll put our name in." Winner was a statewide officer and was in line to be president, but he declined.

Retiring was hard, but Winner had suffered some heart problems, and the deadlines kept repeating themselves every week. Little Prince went off to The Associated Press and the Prince-Mabry family sold to The Meridian Star in 1972.

The closing editorial included a kind of credo: "We have not intended to be a gadfly nor the conscience of the community, but we have been ever aware of the effect of the printed word and the power to sway through editorials or news. Because of this, we have attempted to be objective unless we felt the need to take a public stand without unduly coercing our readers."

One sheet at a time; printing a family newspaper

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By Kent Prince

My oldest newspaper memory traces back to 1945 when they moved The Newton Record to a new office. The old Babcock printing press was almost as wide as the alley behind Feldman's Department Store, and I watched the metal frame lurch uncontrollably as they dragged it down the uneven back way. To a little fellow, kept unhappily across the street from the action, it was like a galleon rolling and tossing in a raging sea.

The press, mainly a cylinder big enough for four newspaper pages with the attached flatbed, must have weighed more than a ton. They somehow moved it onto wooden skids and rolled it across the street and down the alley on a corduroy of pulpwood. As it lumbered like a keel-less hulk over log after log, somebody would grab the wood left behind, hustle it to the front and keep the roll going.

I think they used mules, but whatever locomotive pulled from the front was out of sight to me. I was kept safely on the sidewalk down the street, well away from any flying debris. The spacious new place had a pit poured into the concrete floor for the press to straddle. You could get under there and stand up to clean the ink rollers and work the forms of type. It was a great hidey hole. And a dangerous place to ink your hair if you didn't watch out.

The old building was incredibly small by comparison. But back then, from my wee point of view, it was a miracle of bustle and noise. The paper came out every Thursday, and on Saturday I could walk next door with my nickel for the matinee Western at the movie theater.

My only earlier memory was being taken to the post office across the street. Grandfather W.C. Mabry was postmaster, as well as publisher of the Record, and he was keeper of the postal scales where a toddler could get his weight checked when his mother handed him through the parcel post window.

The old newspaper building had an elevated pulley system, a tangled conglomeration but probably a model of mechanical efficiency. A long, single shaft ran along the ceiling and held a series of flywheels from which looping leather belts dropped down to the various machines and the one motor on the floor.

I was there one day when a whooping cry of alarm cut through the monotonous din of the machinery. Someone luckily noticed the end wheel had worked loose and was rolling off the shaft. It fell straight down and one of the office workers was right under it.

At the cry, he jumped like a startled horse, barely saving himself as the big metal roller crashed into the floor where he had been standing.

That old Babcock press remained in operation long enough to print the paper's Golden Anniversary Edition in 1951 -- 26 pages, the largest single issue up to that time. The maximum impression was four pages at a time, each quarto hand-fed by somebody standing on the platform.

I wonder how many hours W.K. Prince spent driving that machine, hours and hours picking up every sheet and flicking air under it so it would slide onto the template one by one.

After I grew tall enough, the assignment shifted to Little Prince. Looking back, I can't remember when it had any novelty, but I can't forget the price of misfeeding. The paper could wrap itself so tightly around the ink rollers that the end seemed to melt into itself and there was no mercy for the poor soul who had to scrape it off with his fingernails.

C.L. Paschal, one of the kindest gentlemen I ever met, usually did the dirty work. He would wave me off and crawl under the press to attack the cleaning. He said he was keeping my hands clean so I wouldn't have to waste the time or Lava soap before resuming the printing.

After one run finished, new forms were set on the bed and the printed pages had to be flipped so they could go back through impressions on the other side. Again one at a time.

After that, the same four-page spread, now eight to read, had to go through the folder. Still one at a time.

You had a lot of time to think running those machines, the mind synched with the chugging throb of the bed or belts heaving back and forth. Girls, grades, good food ... all the things important to a high schooler.

When they replaced it with a Goss, a modern web press, the old Babcock was left standing in reserve over its hole in the floor. The new press, fed from a huge roll of paper that was cut and folded all in one motion, was fast and smooth and to my growing imagination even more romantic. It was a miniature version of those big newspaper machines you saw in the movies, spinning out headlines of dramatic importance in bold black type.

W.K. Prince was a man in his element with this machine. When he went to work for W.C. Mabry in 1937, he said he didn't know anything about newspapering, but he reckoned he could run the machinery. His father Willie Prince had been a backyard inventor of sorts, and Winner learned early how to connect gears and belts. No matter what broke, he could tell somebody at the oil mill how to weld it back together. As time went on, he learned about editing and publishing and they seldom missed an edition, except for an occasional Christmas and the week they hauled the press down the alley.

With the new Goss, efficient and trust-worthy, W.K. Prince could reach down to the start button, survey the intricate threading of the web, make sure everybody was clear, and with the touch of a finger bring all the belts and rollers to life. Slowly at first, then gradually faster, until the roar filled the room. It was magic.