

North Vernon Plain Dealer and Sun, Incorporated

Founded: 1862

Location: *North Vernon Plain Dealer*: 6 Madison Street, North Vernon (1862–); 528 East O & M Avenue (1999)

North Vernon Sun: 528 East O & M Avenue (1999).

In 1946 Calvert C. Klingner, the owner of the *North Vernon Plain Dealer*, acquired its primary rival, the *North Vernon Sun*. Rather than simply merge the two weekly papers, he continued separate publication schedules. In 1954 Klingner sold the two papers to Burlin B. King. After King died in 1982 his widow, Viola King, became publisher giving the duties of editor to Barbara King. In 1999 Barbara King published the two journals, while Bryce Mayer edited the weeklies. The company not only publishes newspapers, but also offers offset printing, typesetting, graphic design, and glue binding services to its customers, and expected sales of more than \$1 million in 1999.

The older of the two papers is the *Plain Dealer*. A. S. and R. A. Conner were the first publishers of the journal, establishing their office at 6 Madison Street in 1862. A year's subscription cost \$1.25 and the journal was published every Thursday. R. A. Conner had been a Union army prisoner at Andersonville during the Civil War. Perhaps understandably, he seemed to delight in publishing any news that portrayed the former Confederacy as undeserving of restored status. As a staunch Republican he peppered the news with his editorial comments on the continued persecution of Republican party members in the South and the righteous stand of the Grand Old Party during the Civil War. In June 1868 J. C. Cope purchased the weekly from R. A. Conner, continuing the paper's pro-Republican stance. Within the decade, Cope was elected mayor of North

Vernon, later becoming county auditor and finally president of the North Vernon National Bank from 1904 to 1919.

Under both the Connors and Cope, the paper carried more national than local news on the front page of each six column, four-page edition. By 1868 a year's subscription had risen in price to \$1.50 a year. Much of the newsprint was devoted to advertisements, political thought, or editorials, but transcripts of Republican political speeches were also common. In addition to politics, both sets of editors were devoted Methodists, running a long series on the merits of non-immersion baptism from both a historical and theological perspective.

William G. Norris purchased a portion of the newspaper in 1871. Within three years Norris had become the sole proprietor, and by the late 1870s had created a larger masthead for the journal and had increased the number of columns by one. While Norris changed the look of the paper modestly, the weekly continued to be published every Thursday and remained fiercely Republican in its politics. The orientation of the weekly changed dramatically during Norris's tenure as editor and publisher, tending more toward the local. By 1882 he had begun to incorporate news from around the county, sent to him by town correspondents, and national news virtually disappeared. The items reported were generally personal happenings, details of who went where on vacation, or the noting of relatives coming to visit from a distant city. By 1887 the subtitle below the masthead read "devoted exclusively to the local interests of Jennings County and her towns." In response to the depression of the 1880s Norris lowered the newspaper's price to \$1.25 a year.

In 1891 the *Vernon Banner* and the *North Vernon Plain Dealer* merged to form the *Banner Plain Dealer* and Fred H. Nauer became the paper's proprietor. W. C. Stineback had established the *Banner* in May 1851, as a Whig party journal. In the middle 1850s its political orientation had been changed to side with the Republican party by its new owner J. B. Conner. Nauer was its last publisher before it was merged with the *Plain Dealer*. After J. Scott Smith purchased the *Banner Plain Dealer* in 1902 he and editor Calvert Klingner shortened the name of the weekly by returning it to its original form. A decade later Klingner bought the paper. Under Smith, the price dropped for the four-page weekly to \$1.00 for a year's subscription and the number of columns expanded to eight. Personal news from around the county continued to take up the majority of the paper's print space, along with numerous advertisements. Smith continued to back the Republican party, but editorials in favor of the GOP were usually reserved for the publications closest to election day.

Klingner brought organization to the *Plain Dealer's* pages. While local, sports, and social news were jumbled within the eight pages of the weekly, a classified section brought those items for sale under one heading by 1922. Klingner hired Mary Cassin as a reporter for the paper in 1913. Cassin remained at the journal for forty years and became quite popular throughout the community. Generally, Klingner followed the example of his predecessors and supported the Republican party, but in 1925 the newspaper came out in support of the "Citizens Ticket," an anti-Ku Klux Klan group that included Democrats as well as Republicans. Klingner published a strongly worded editorial in favor of the anti-Klan team on the eve of the election.

By 1935 the pages of the *Plain Dealer* resembled most other small county journals, replete with pictures and pages devoted to mostly one topic, such as a sports page or a society section. The small-town feel of the weekly remained intact though through the continuation of reports from area towns concerning visits made, dinner guests, and vacations taken. During World War II Klingner added a page devoted to the personal events of military families, including promotions, enlistment announcements, and postings and sent a free copy of the paper to each Jennings County enlistee. Political editorials continued to be rare, except when election day neared, but the opinion of the editor on local issues was clearly stated in the “As We See It” column. The space provided an outlet for Klingner’s discussion of mostly nonpolitical issues, such as his rejection of the adoption of an official state dog or his disapproval of chain letters. By 1951 the price of a year’s subscription to the Thursday weekly had increased to \$2.00.

Burlin King, a native of Iowa, bought the *Plain Dealer* in August 1954 and named Richard Mayer, Jr., as editor. Throughout the 1950s the weekly continued to identify with the Republican party, but by 1967 the sentiment of the paper’s owners and editors seemed to side with the Democratic party. While the paper continued to proclaim itself “a Republican paper” into the late 1980s, in actuality it refrained from supporting any particular political organization on election day. However, the provision of space in the weekly and the substance of columns by Democratic senator Vance Hartke or Democratic representative Lee Hamilton, as well as the rare *Plain Dealer* political editorial, indicated a leaning toward the Democrats. By the late 1950s the reports from towns concerning the personal lives of individuals declined, but did not disappear from the paper’s pages. In

the late 1960s a “Looking Back in Time in Jennings” column reminded readers of occurrences in the county five, ten, twenty-five, and fifty years before.

In the 1970s the sister weeklies became less competitive and more complimentary, with the *Plain Dealer* the journal with the most number of pages and the longer stories and the *Sun* reporting brief accounts of happenings and providing more personal local news in fewer pages. By 1974 inflation and the country’s economic woes had increased the price of the *Plain Dealer* to \$8.00 for a year’s delivery. Around 1978 the paper switched from a single column format to a block column style, which allowed more coverage of a story to be related on a single page. By the late 1970s the management of the paper began an expanded editorial page, a decision that garnered the journal’s editors a commendation by the Hoosier State Press Association in 1978 for the “best editorial page of a weekly.” The paper continued to carry mostly news of local interest throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Each decade brought the addition of more pages to the Thursday paper. By the late 1970s the average number of pages increased from eight to twelve. In 1986 the average length of each addition numbered twenty-four pages, rising by the late 1990s to forty-eight pages. The increase in the number of pages and inflation necessitated the increased price, from \$16.00 per year in 1986 to \$26.00 for a year’s subscription for both papers in 1999.

The younger of the two journals is the *North Vernon Sun*. It began as a Democratic newspaper in September 1872, published by Samuel W. Holmes and J. N. Marsh. Holmes later sold his share in the business to Marsh, who in the 1870s sold the journal to Charles D. Shank. Shank did not hold on to the weekly long, however, selling

to M. B. Grubb sometime in the 1880s, who in turn sold it to a Mr. Reine and Charles P. Butler around 1889.

A decade later Charles H. Wohrer bought the *Sun*, taking J. Newton Culp as a partner in 1905. Culp had been the publisher of the *Vernon Journal* since 1902. When Culp became the publisher of the *Sun* he merged the two newspapers. C. E. Wagner began publishing the *Journal* in 1891 as a Republican party organ. It remained loyal to the GOP until Culp changed its affiliation to the Democrats in 1902. Culp later became the sole proprietor of the *Sun* before selling half of the business to Ernest Klingner. Fred C. Lockwood, the editor of the *Sun* for a number of years, purchased Culp's share in the business in 1918.

During the Culp, Klingner, and Lockwood era the paper sold for \$1.00–\$1.25 for a year's subscription, ran to as many as eight pages in length, and used a six-column format. While the paper printed mostly local news, it differed from its rival the *Plain Dealer* in presenting up-to-date agricultural science news. A regular column informed farmers of the most recent scientific methods in animal husbandry. Like many county papers it had personal notes on happenings from each town, local school news, and serials. Culp or Klingner must have been music lovers, because around 1910 the paper began publishing copies of popular sheet music. The trend did not last long, however, disappearing by the late 1910s. The *Sun* took an active interest in the Near East Relief Campaign after World War I, giving much space and attention to the work of relieving Syria, Greece, and Turkey, and the campaign's need for funds. It was also very active in the movement to get the county seat moved to North Vernon from Vernon in 1920.

Klingner and Lockwood did not hold on to the journal for long, selling to Herman G. and Leo J. Miller in 1920. Lockwood continued as editor for a year. The Millers brought some stability to the Democratic weekly, running the journal until the end of World War II. They added new dimensions to the weekly, including the inclusion of national and international news briefs, but kept traditional aspects of the journal as well, such as the farm reports and local personal news. The price for a year's delivery remained at \$1.25 until dropping to \$1.00 a year sometime during the Great Depression. Under the Millers the paper moved away from local news, focusing on items from around the world, and adding a comics section by the early 1930s. During World War II the paper was cut back to only four pages a week, retaining its six-column format. The publishers left national and international news to other media outlets, dropped the comics section, and inserted a column on "Boys in Service," which listed enrollments, transfers, and personal news of Jennings County servicemen.

Around 1946 the Sun Publishing Company, headed by Calvert Klingner bought the newspaper, leasing it to R. W. Norris. Earl Wolfinger was hired as editor in 1945. Norris renewed the interest of the paper in national and world news, providing short paragraphs of items in the "Weekly News Analysis" column and increased the number of pages to eight. He also brought back the "Farm Topics" column that related to farmers the most recent scientific information that came from Purdue University, especially in the field of caring for cattle. Norris organized the paper into a more modern format, with sections devoted to similar interests, including religion, social life, home life, and the comics. The paper remained loyal to the Democratic party, becoming part of the Democratic Newspapers Association, but seldom launched political editorials, except

near election day, and praised officials of both parties when they performed their duties well.

Burlin King acquired the *Sun* in 1954, hiring Richard Mayer, Jr., as editor, duties both retained until 1982. Under King a subscription dropped in price from \$2.00 per year to \$1.00 a year, and the number of pages issued every Tuesday dropped from eight to six. National news faded from the pages of the *Sun* as the years wore on, but a column on personal health began in the late 1950s. King continued the tradition of his predecessors, allowing the paper to remain a Democratic party-affiliated journal into the 1970s. By 1967 the *Sun* had again become an eight-page weekly, published on Saturday, and the cost had risen to \$4.00 a year.

In the 1970s the *Sun*'s purpose was narrowed to provide short news items, court news, and nostalgia pieces, a practice continued into the 1990s. It retained a small-town feeling in its pages by conveying personal information and short biographical sketches of interesting or prominent people in the community, much the same as one would find in a similar paper from the early twentieth century. In fact, while many county newspapers began dropping personal reports from various towns, concerning who visited whom, travels taken, or parties attended, in the 1960s or 1970s, the *Sun* continued to report such information into 1999.