

Rochester Sentinel

Founded: 1858

Location: 628½ Main Street, Rochester (1858–72); 800 Main Street (1872–94); 727 Main Street (1894–1924); 118 East Eighth Street (1924–)

The origins of the *Rochester Sentinel* are somewhat murky, but it appears that a stock company headed by D. R. Pershing and W. E. Carothers launched the Democratic party weekly on Saturday, 18 September 1858. A year later Archie McDonald either bought the paper outright or became the leading stockholder, but in any case he handed it to Isaiah Walker after enlisting in the Union Army in 1861. Walker held on to the concern until 1863 when James S. Chapin and William Osgood bought the *Sentinel*. J. J. Davis, who had been hired by McDonald, continued as the editor of the journal throughout the Walker era. By 1860 the six-column folio presented itself as “A Democratic Newspaper—Devoted to Politics, News, Education, Miscellany, & c.” As with many early partisan newspapers, most of the matter in the *Sentinel* was devoted to politics, and the editors printed long excerpts from speeches by the leading lights in the party. Perhaps unusual for Democratic weeklies of the day, the *Sentinel* was fiercely pro-union before the start of the Civil War.

In January 1865 John Nafe acquired the paper, changing its name to the *Standard*. Nafe soon tired of the business and sold it to R. M. Hathaway, who quickly relinquished control of the weekly to Charles Caffyn and Al Pugh. Carter Hathaway replaced Caffyn as a partner in 1866, only to sell his share in the concern to F. R. Harmon in 1869. Harmon and Pugh sold the journal in early 1870 to W. H. Mattingly and Patrick O’Brien. The partnership did not last long and Mattingly and O’Brien sold the weekly to J. C. Loveland in May 1870.

Loveland changed the name of the journal to the *City Times* before selling it in November 1870 to Platt McDonald. McDonald restored the name “Sentinel” to the paper’s masthead. The ownership shuffle continued even after the return of the original name. McDonald sold it to A. T. Metcalf in late 1871. In turn, A. Tully Bitters acquired the journal in 1872, selling it four years later to Henry A. Barnhart. At the time McDonald owned the newspaper, each issue, published on Saturdays, averaged eight pages and had at some point been enlarged to seven columns. Under the paper’s moniker ran the notice “A Democratic News and Family Paper—Devoted to the Interests of Fulton County.” Advertising, as in the past, continued to be displayed on the first page with social and personal news from around the county. The majority of the paper’s content leaned to the serious rather than the social and concentrated on the national and state political scene.

Barnhart brought stability to the weekly and in 1896 initiated a daily edition. By the mid-1890s the number of columns had been reduced to six, but the number of pages remained steady at eight. Many drawings illustrated each issue, and advertisements were confined to the body of the paper. Personals from each town in the county, which revealed such news as who had gone on vacation, visits by relatives, health concerns, and general gossip, blanketed the first page, while more serious political news, biography, and serials of famous books could be found in the remaining seven pages.

Barnhart was a Cass County native who did not move to Rochester until after his election as county surveyor in 1884. Barnhart became the owner of the paper after Bitters was appointed postmaster of Rochester in 1885. After being elected to Congress in 1908, Barnhart turned over the operation of the papers, but not ownership, to Harold

and Floyd Van Trump. Later the brothers founded their own newspaper and magazine company, which allowed Dean L. Barnhart to begin leasing the paper from his father in 1913. Dean was an Indiana University graduate and was one of the first students in Bloomington to receive a bachelor's degree in journalism. After graduating in 1911, he took a job as a reporter with the *South Bend News-Times*, working his way to night city editor by 1913. Under Dean the *Sentinel's* daily edition was a six-column folio published every evening except Sunday. By 1914 column headings were bolder and the print larger than the rest of the news. Political news and serious local news ran on page one, and pictures had replaced drawings as the best choice for illustrating a story. Personals could be found throughout the week in columns written by residents and printed together under the town's name. Dean left Rochester after six years as editor to take the post of editor and business manager for the *Goshen Democrat*.

Hugh A. Barnhart, Dean's brother, became the owner of the journal in 1919. Like his brother, Hugh was a graduate of Indiana University. He served in the army during World War I and, after being honorably discharged, came to work for the *Sentinel*. His only other previous newspaper experience had been on the *Indiana Daily Student*. Under Hugh the paper expanded to seven columns, but continued to use the four-page format. Large, bold headlines streamed across the page, attempting to attract readers with the latest world events. Personals continued, but were now found in the "Drippings from the Town Pump" column. The price for a year's subscription by 1923 was \$5.00, up from \$1.50 in 1894 and \$3.00 in 1914. In the early 1920s power presses replaced the old handpresses. During the Indiana State High School Basketball Tournament and

presidential elections, patrons would crowd the office to get the play-by-play or the most current vote tallies off the International News Service wire.

Despite charging \$5.00 a year the *Sentinel* was barely profitable. The town had two competing dailies and three weeklies, all vying for customers and advertising money. Four years after taking over the newspaper, Hugh Barnhart merged the *Sentinel* with another struggling paper, the *Rochester News*, headed by Floyd and Harold Van Trump. Barnhart and the Van Trumps shared ownership of the new company, stopping publication of the weekly editions of both journals within the next few years. The name of the combined daily paper was retitled the *News-Sentinel*. The new paper announced it would be independent in its politics. The timing of the merger was fortunate and probably allowed the concern to survive the Great Depression.

The *Rochester News* had been named the *Republican* from its beginnings in 1867 until October 1923, when the Van Trumps bought the establishment. Other owners familiar with the workings of the *Sentinel* included J. J. Davis. In 1886 the *Republican* became a daily. Ownership changes were common, and Marguerite L. Miller owned the paper for only a little more than a year before selling it to the Van Trumps. After the merger of the *News* and the *Sentinel*, Harold Van Trump retired. The board of directors for the *News-Sentinel* was evenly divided between adherents of the two political parties. Several years after the merger Floyd Van Trump and Hugh Barnhart bought all of the outstanding stock, but continued the nonpartisan nature of the paper's editorial page.

During the Great Depression the local bank that handled the paper's funds folded, and payroll at the *Sentinel* could not be met. After hearing various options, the employees voted to reduce their salaries rather than allow some of their colleagues to lose

their jobs. A few years later not even reductions in salaries could save the paper from revenue losses caused by declining advertising. To fix the problem temporarily, sometime around 1934, Barnhart came up with the idea of issuing his own scrip pay for employees that would be accepted by the paper's main advertisers. The scrip could then be used by the businesses to advertise in the *Sentinel*. For three years Barnhart paid his employees, at least partially, in scrip. After finding a way to begin to pay his employees in cash, Barnhart was appointed to an advisory post in state government under Gov. Clifford Townsend and was reappointed by Gov. Henry Schricker. After taking the job, Barnhart reduced his salary at the paper, which relieved some financial strains, and permitted Carl Van Trump to take over as editor during Barnhart's extended absence.

In the 1940s each issue ran from four to six pages in length and included seven columns. Headlines of Allied victories continued to stream across the page in large, bold print. Political news dominated the first page, but sports, comics, and a society section competed with serious news in the body of the paper. Although fewer in number than before, personals continued to inform readers of the comings and goings of their neighbors and friends. During World War II short personal notices of military families were covered in a separate column from other personal items. On the editorial page a syndicated Washington, D.C., column reported the progress of bills and the inner workings of the government, but partisan rhetoric was largely absent.

Carl Van Trump edited or coedited the paper from 1929 until 1952, when Jack K. Overmyer took over as editor. When Floyd Van Trump died in 1956 his interest in the firm was transferred to Overmyer. A native of Rochester and an Indiana University graduate, Overmyer had previously worked for the *News-Sentinel* during high school and

more recently for the *Indianapolis Star*'s sports department. Overmyer succeeded Hugh Barnhart as publisher in 1961, a post he held until 1982. Overmyer shortened the name to the *Sentinel* shortly after ascending to the top post. He became the sole owner of the paper in 1976.

In the 1950s, under Overmyer, the number of pages per issue and the number of columns per page increased to eight, but headlines no longer reached across the entire page. While the front page mentioned some national and international news, the majority of content in the body of the journal focused on the local and state events. Personals and sports kept their traditional spaces, but most personal, social, club, and wedding or anniversary news was reorganized and placed on the "Women's Angle" page. During this period the editorials remained nonpartisan, and syndicated columns began to appear, including Frank A. White's "Hoosier Day." Throughout the week the editors printed a daily special page in which columns pertaining only to one subject would appear, such as farming, construction, gardening, and religion.

By the late 1960s little had changed in the makeup of the paper, but a few items had been added, including "Dear Abby" and a page filled with photographs of events from around the world. In 1971 the Duplex press, which had printed the *Sentinel* since 1914, was replaced by offset presses. With the advent of these new machines the newspaper switched to a block paragraph, six-column format. The number of pages per issue varied from six to twelve. By 1975 personals stopped being reported in the paper, but people in the community could still find out about impending social events on the "Family's Angle" page. During the 1980s the format of the paper did not change, except that news stories became better organized under headings that included national news, the

“Hoosier Scene,” and a “Lifestyles” section that contained the stories included on the family page a decade before.

In 1982 Overmyer handed the duties of publisher to his daughter Sarah Overmyer Wilson and vacated the editor’s chair in favor of his son-in-law, William S. “Bill” Wilson. After graduating from Indiana University, Bill and Sarah worked in journalism in Alaska and then in Missouri, where Bill worked on a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting team at the *Kansas City Star*. In 1999 the *Rochester Sentinel* continued to be published six days a week, and Jack K. Overmyer retained the post of president of the Sentinel Corporation. Circulation for the paper hovered around five thousand for the *Sentinel* and seven thousand for its free, weekly Compass Edition.