



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

The Baker Family Legacy

The family-owned Register-Guard is an exception to today's trend toward chain-owned newspapers.

BY COLIN STANTON

Family newspapers are a dying breed today, having been swept aside by increasingly powerful, giant newspaper chains. In response, most newspaper families have decided to either quit or cash in their holdings.

Then there's The Eugene Register-Guard. Owned and operated by the Baker family since 1927, The Register-Guard stands as proof that, under the proper circumstances, a family paper can still survive. But like most family enterprises, questions about unbridled loyalty exist.

The top management of the paper is made up solely of Bakers as it has for years. Alton F. Baker Jr., whose father purchased the paper in 1927, currently stands as chairman and editor emeritus. His brother, Edwin Baker, is the publisher, and Tony Baker, Alton Jr.'s son, is the current editor.

In addition, Fletcher Little, whose mother was Alton Jr.'s sister, is the advertising manager, and Bridget Baker, Edwin's daughter, is in charge of marketing.

Colin Stanton is a University pre-journalism sophomore and a freelance writer. He calls Fullerton, California home.

"Gosh, there's 13 or 14 family members working here right now," says Bridget Baker. "They're in all different capacities, from top management to traveling ad proofs, selling classified ads part-time, and managing paper carriers. They're in all different areas and ages, spouses as well as blood family members."

"There are a lot of families who have nothing to do with the Bakers, but are second or third generation families who worked here. There's a lot of family feeling here."

Family feeling or not, new Bakers continue to assume the posts their ancestors previously held.

"We're in the midst of a transition from my father's generation to my generation, in terms of power," says Bridget Baker. "At this point, Alton Baker Jr. doesn't really spend much time at the paper any more. He runs the board meetings, and that's about it."

"My father now is the publisher, and he is actively involved in trying to get the younger generation prepared to take over, so he's kind of the interim publisher. Tony is slated to be the next publisher."

"That's why there's three of them now — one that's not here very much; my dad, who's managing it right now; and Tony, who's being brought along right now, as it were."

When Tony Baker does take control, he will be only the fourth publisher of

the paper since the Bakers moved west.

"That should take place within the next five years or so," says Tony Baker. "As we perpetuate the family business, that's part of the transition; identifying someone who looks like the right person to do that."

In 1927 Alton F. Baker Sr. came to Eugene from Ohio, where his father, Elbert Baker, ran the Cleveland Plain Dealer. With help from his father and family, Alton bought The Eugene Guard, and his brother Frank bought the Tacoma News Tribune.

Alton Baker officially took over as publisher of The Eugene Guard on March 1, 1927. Paul R. and Eugene S. Kelty, who had previously owned the paper, stayed on briefly as editor and business manager, respectively. Paul Kelty was offered the editor position permanently, but declined.

When Baker took over the paper it had a circulation of 6,000 — nearly double what it had been when the Kelty's first purchased it. He soon named himself editor, and William Tugman, a good friend of his who had come out with him from Ohio, became managing editor.

At that time, however, there were two competing papers in the market.

"About the time they came here," says Bridget Baker, "the owner of the Eugene Register came and talked to

my grandfather, and asked him if he'd like to sell his newspaper. He told him 'no,' that he didn't come all the way to Oregon to sell his paper to somebody else."

"Three years later, in 1930, the gentleman offered to sell his paper to our family, and our family bought it. They merged the two, and that's when it became The Register-Guard."

The Register-Guard's first edition came out Nov. 18, 1930. The management was the same as it was on the Guard, with Alton Baker Sr. as publisher and editor, and William Tugman as managing editor.

Remarkably, nothing changed in the leadership for 20 years. Then, in 1950, Baker gave the editorship to Tugman and concentrated solely on the business side.

The first big shakeup came in 1954. Tugman left the paper and purchased the Port Umpqua Courier. He was replaced by Alton F. Baker Jr. with Edwin Baker being promoted to business manager.

Alton Baker Jr. became the publisher, and Edwin Baker the general manager, on March 1, 1961. Alton Sr. went into semi-retirement, staying on only as chairman. He devoted most of his time to his extensive community work. He was heavily involved in Boy Scouts, Rotary International, United Appeal and Community Chest, the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Associa-