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— Galen Rarick

involved in the business, according to Bridget Baker. They have papers in Tigard, Beaverton, and Forest Grove.

"In my generation we have 16 grandchildren," says Tony Baker. "There are a number of them who are interested in the business, and there was a feeling on Ted (Edwin) and Alton's behalf that there just weren't enough chairs here. Not everybody would fit here."

"There was a newspaper property up there that looked like a good investment, and would also create an opportunity for other members of the family to work. My cousin, Ann Baker Mack, and her husband Don, who both were reporters here at the Guard, are helping run those papers up north. Her brother and his wife worked there for a while. They're down here now."

The Bakers also owned Willamette Week in Portland for several years, but sold it after it proved to be not very profitable.

Rarick sees this type of small, local chain to be a growing trend.

"This is becoming more and more common," he says. "The Bakers have their publications. The Forresters have papers in Astoria and Pendleton. I guess the question you have to ask is, well, are these papers family owned, or are they now parts of chains? And I think the answer has to be that they do have local family control."

Rarick thinks that family papers are on their way out, to be replaced by chain-owned papers.

"They're clearly going the way of the Edsel," he says. "Chains can operate more cheaply. They buy all their supplies in huge quantities. They can also train reporters and send them out

somewhere along the chain."

That last factor, Rarick and Bridget Baker agree, is part of the reason why coverage of local news tends to be better in locally owned papers.

"There's been a study on editorial content, of the Editorial/Opinion pages, saying that it becomes more anemic in chain-owned papers," Bridget Baker says. "Particularly because editorial writers are transferred in from other locations and don't have a lot of community knowledge or community feeling, the editorials tend to be more on state and national issues rather than local issues, so nobody takes a stand as much on them. They're more hesitant to take a stand for fear of offending someone in the community."

"When we write some editorials, you just know that there's going to be a whole bunch of calls to the circulation department the next day from people stopping their subscriptions. They usually do that to make a philosophical point, and then they start it up again a few weeks or months later."

Another bonus of local ownership that she sees is that the Baker family has been willing to invest heavily in the paper to maintain a high quality product. The family has taken out little apart from their salaries.

"We've been consistently in the forefront technologically," she says. "We were one of the first papers to get an offset press in 1975, and the press was a prototype."

The paper is also experimenting with pagination, in which computers design and lay out pages. The Register-Guard was one of the first papers in the country to have classified advertising



Photo by Elizabeth Asher

Today's Register-Guard is the result of a merger of the Eugene Guard (above) which was owned by Alton Baker Sr., and the Eugene Register on Nov. 18, 1930.

pagination, and is currently experimenting with the editorial aspects of it.

Bridget Baker feels that the paper does a good job of giving a political balance.

"It tends to be pretty middle-of-the-road, I think," she says. "The

Republicans, or Conservatives, might refer to the paper as the 'Red Guard,' but then a lot of the people who are more radical think of us as the 'Right Guard.'"

In keeping with the tradition started by Alton Baker Sr., the Baker family is big in community service activities, according to Bridget Baker.

"The publisher is super-involved," she says. "He was the head of the Oregon Economic Development Foundation. He's been involved in almost every major charity in the community, following in the footsteps of his father. He's not been involved on the news side, so he hasn't been involved in what's been written about these groups, and he's tried to keep that separate."

"In addition, Tony, Fletch, and I have all worked with different charitable groups. Tony has been on the YMCA board and helped with fundraising. Fletch has worked with the Mid-Oregon Ad Club... I don't even know all the stuff he's done. I've worked with United Way and Campfire, primarily. All of us have just been really involved."

If the number of family members interested in the paper is any indication, The Register-Guard could be staying in the hands of the Bakers for a long time.

"There's a lot of Bakers here, no question," says Tony Baker. "I don't think that's wrong, provided they are channelled into a job that they can handle. I would think that if they're qualified, any owner of a family business would like to see his children and relatives have an opportunity to work there. It isn't much of a family business if there isn't that opportunity. It just happens that there are a lot of Bakers around."

The Willamette Week Saga

One newspaper the Baker family owned for a short time is not at all like the moderate-to-conservative, community-oriented papers that bear the Baker masthead today.

Portland's Willamette Week was and is an "alternative" newsweekly, combining fine arts photography and biting investigative journalism. Where The Register-Guard maintains a strong sense of responsibility to the community, embodying the strongholds of mainstream journalism, Willamette Week made its mark by challenging the powers that be without the reverence expected of standard newspapers.

Willamette Week was born in 1974, shortly after President Nixon resigned. The Register-Guard bought it in October 1977 and sold it in October 1983 to the current publisher, Richard Meeker, and editor, Mark Zusman.

Meeker, who was Willamette Week's editor from shortly after the Bakers bought it until January 1980, praises the family for supporting an alternative paper — "a remarkable and praiseworthy departure," he says.

Ross Hall, one of Willamette Week's founders, adds, "Ted Baker was primarily concerned with supporting this kind of effort because it had

been years since anyone tried to start any journalism of this sort in the state." Hall headed the paper's business department from its beginning until the Bakers sold it.

Despite Willamette Week's deviation from what the Bakers were used to operating, the family did not try to change it.

"It was always known that they expected us to produce excellent journalism," Meeker says, but the Bakers did not meddle with day-to-day operations or editorial content.

Hall agrees. "They were not heavy-handed managers," he says.

But the family was offended initially by the paper's Person-to-Person classified ads, in which people advertised for companionship.

"The biggest conflict that we ever got into — I created the Person-to-Person advertisements — and when we started the Person-to-Person ads, there was quite a bit of fuss in Eugene, and they were quite offended," Hall says.

But Hall says he convinced Tony Baker to accept the ads by explaining that adults in the Portland area had few ways to meet each other. And he says he showed Baker the ads would be controlled so no one would be hurt.

"I felt at all times when I was

editor of the paper that the role of The Register-Guard was a thoroughly supportive one," he says. Willamette Week became an award-winning newspaper, and "it was the Bakers' financial support that made that possible," he says.

The Bakers did ask Willamette Week to quit accepting advertisements for X-rated movies.

Meeker respected the move because a newspaper loses money any time it excludes advertisers, he says.

But Hall says he disapproved of turning away X-rated movie ads, saying the paper should accept ads from any firm licensed to do business. Tony Baker "accepted the argument," Hall says, "but it was just too repulsive to him personally."

The Bakers finally sold the paper because it was losing money and because they had purchased the Times papers in Tigard and Beaverton and were concentrating their resources there.

"They almost abandoned us," Hall says, "what I mean is, we didn't get decisions..." Whereas Bakers relocated to run the Times papers, no Bakers ever worked on the Willamette Week staff.

— MICHELLE BRENCE