

How did you Hear the News? by Alan F. Rumrill

Most of us have been asked the question: “Did you hear the news?” The phrase apparently originated long ago at a time when most people learned newsworthy information by hearing it spoken by another person. However, the coronavirus pandemic has reminded us just how many ways there are for us to “hear the news” in the 21st century. Individuals can still get updates directly from others, but there are also many news and media outlets that offer news in other formats. We can indeed hear the news on the radio, we can watch the news on television or on the computer, and there are many ways to read news updates, from email and numerous social media platforms available through the internet, to the centuries old format of the printed newspaper.

During times of emergency and noteworthy events occurring locally, nationally, or internationally, people want to be able to get updates often to see what is happening near and far, and to learn how it might impact their lives. This has been true in our region for centuries. During times of infectious epidemics, natural disasters, and social and political upheaval, local residents are anxious to receive the most recent reports.

Throughout most of the period of recorded history in the Monadnock region, printed newspapers have been the main source of news in the area. Even before Keene’s first newspaper, The New Hampshire Recorder and Weekly Advertiser, began printing in August of 1787, local residents relied on newspapers, delivered to the town by a post rider, to learn the news of the state and the wider world. Dozens of newspapers have been published in Keene since that time. The Keene Sentinel has been issued here since 1799 and is one of the oldest continuously published papers in the country. The Sentinel has been the paper of record in the region for many years and is still the primary source for many local residents.

The year 1815 is a good example of early local reporting of momentous events. War was raging and a natural disaster struck during the same year. The War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain had been dragging on since June of 1812, when the Sentinel had printed the declaration of war along with the headline “War! Unqualified War!” The fighting concluded in January of 1815 at the Battle of New Orleans. A letter from General Andrew Jackson was published in the paper ten days after the battle – news traveled slowly then – proclaiming “Unparalleled Victory!” in which Jackson explained that the enemy had lost 15,000 killed, wounded, and taken prisoner in the battle, while the US troops had suffered six killed and eight wounded.

Nine months later natural disaster struck much closer to home. The Great September Gale hurtled into the Granite State near Jaffrey and continued northward. This major hurricane caused considerable damage in the region. The newspaper quickly reported on the “Destructive Storm” that caused the “destruction of Barns, orchards, timber, and in fact of everything but dwelling houses.” This 1815 storm was probably the tempest that gave Hurricane Road in Keene its name.

Reports about a cholera outbreak that spread across the country in the summer of 1849 offer interesting comparisons to the current coronavirus reports. The Sentinel was published weekly at the time and offered updates on the epidemic in each issue with the title “cholera register” or “cholera statistics.” The reports detailed statistics for numerous cities across the eastern half of the United States. Sad tales of widespread infection and death were sprinkled throughout the reports. St. Louis lost more than 1400 people to the disease during a two-week period in late June and early July. New York City suffered 1409 deaths during a single week in July. In Montreal rioters destroyed the hospitals, fearing that cholera would be spread from those institutions. Cheshire County residents used the newspaper to track the spread of the disease to determine if it was approaching southwest New Hampshire.

War came to the country again in the 1860s. This conflict saw brother fighting against brother as the American Civil War divided the nation. The nearest battles took place more than 400 miles away, but local newspapers contained substantial quantities of war news to keep the local populace informed. The papers trumpeted all major battlefield encounters through four long years of war. These began with stories carrying headlines such as “Civil War begun by the Rebels. Fort Sumter Attacked and Taken!” and approached a conclusion with several reports under the banner “Another Crowning Victory. Lee and his Army Surrender. The Grandest Event of the War” following the Battle of Appomattox Court House in early April of 1865. Although the fighting took place far away from Cheshire County, thousands of local men fought in the war. Consequently, the papers also carried news about local infantry regiments and printed many letters from soldiers who were in the thick of the fight.



Clearing Mechanic St. after the Blizzard of 1888

The year 1888 brought another natural disaster to the region. The Blizzard of 1888 was, according to the Sentinel, “The Worst Storm Known” in the history of the region. Three feet of snow and 15-foot snow drifts paralyzed the region. Town meetings were postponed for one of the few times in local history. Keene newspapers continued to print, but the snow prevented them from being delivered to the post office. It was during this storm that a new form of communicating the news was mentioned. “Telegraphic communication with Boston was cut off during the afternoon,” the

paper reported.

During the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 the Sentinel reported on the specific path of transmission of the disease from Massachusetts into Keene, and then made daily updates on the progression of the influenza locally. This information aided the city board of health with decisions about how to react to the flu. Quarantines were implemented and stores, schools, churches, and recreation facilities were closed in an attempt to slow the spread of the disease.

Keene Evening Sentinel

VOL. XCV, NO. 72 KEENE, N. H., SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1938 PRICE TWO CENTS

Emergency Edition Printed on Commercial Press Operated by Gasoline Engine

Hurricane Wreckage Being Cleared; Gas Restored; Power Expected Soon; Visitors Barred From Streets by Police

As all available agencies today continued the herculean task of restoring some semblance of normal conditions following Wednesday's flood and hurricane in Keene, police officials prepared to close the city to sightseers Sunday to keep the traffic problem at a minimum. Chief of Police Robert E. Tucker is assigning national guardsmen and Legionnaires to principal entrance points to the city and will route traffic around Keene. State police will cooperate. Gas service has been restored and electricity is being brought into the city.

An Emergency Edition of the Sentinel, Sept. 24, 1938

From that time forward new methods of disseminating the news were introduced frequently. In 1927 the first transcontinental telephone call was placed from Keene to England from a phone booth in the Keene National Bank, opening the city to rapid international communication. The famed hurricane of 1938 knocked out all telephone service, so short wave radios were employed in Keene to learn news of the outside world. The Sentinel did not miss a beat, however, employing a gasoline engine to operate its press so the paper could keep local residents informed. The day after the storm the front page of the paper's small "Emergency Edition" proclaimed: "Keene Swept by Hurricane; Water Drives Hundreds From Homes; Damage Cannot Be Estimated."

Free radio transmissions began broadcasting in the 1920s, but it was President Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" beginning in the 1930s that dramatically extended the reach of radio news into homes across the nation. Then, on December 8, 1941, Roosevelt made his "Day of Infamy" speech after the attack on Pearl Harbor drew the United States into WWII. Millions around the world tuned in to hear the speech, including the Wilson family on South Lincoln Street in Keene, with five children under age 15, who sat around their RCA radio to learn the news of the attack. Just over 20 years later those children had children of their own, who sat in front of the grainy picture on their families' black and white televisions in their Cheshire County homes watching the news of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.



Sharing news by short wave radio, hurricane of 1938

Today there are so many forms and methods of reporting that it can be confusing for those who are trying to keep updated on news of the coronavirus. Furthermore, not all of the sources agree, which has been true since news reporting began, but now information comes to us so quickly and from so many directions that it can be difficult to determine what is credible. Our local sources, however, including radio, television, and newspapers, remain steadfast in their attempt to circulate the news accurately. The Keene Sentinel, for example, maintains its extensive history of reporting the news, continuing to publish in 2020 more than 220 years after the paper was established.