

**The San Jose Mercury News:
From Past to Present**

**An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County**

**by
Kristin Kiley
2545 Cottle Avenue
San Jose, Ca 95125
(408) 269-1908**

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Early History of the Present Day Mercury News	3
The Mercury News Since 1956	10
Notes	14
Bibliography	15

Introduction

“We enter upon the task before us with a full knowledge of all its toils, responsibilities, and brain racking cares, and to that task we will devote our energies and humble ability,” J.J. Owen remarked at the beginning of his ownership of the San Jose Mercury News.⁽¹⁾ He based the rest of his life and work on those words to successfully create one of the most popular newspapers in California. The San Jose Mercury News based its paper on the surrounding society, and because of this admired quality, this paper became what it is today.

Early History of the Paper

Until June of 1851, San Jose, or for the most part, all of California was without a newspaper. The first signs of any publishings came from San Jose where little newspapers began to come out of the woodwork. The State Journal was published by James B. Devoe on December 19, 1850, and the Daily Argus, (by C.M. Blake) came soon after on January 4, 1851. (2) These publishings, however, were not circulating papers. They were used as political billboards for the candidates in the city of San Jose. The first published pamphlets did not survive and soon came the San Jose Weekly Visitor on June 20, 1851, brought to the news stands by J.C. Emerson, A. Jones, and J.F. Damon. (3) They opened up their small business with the scraps from the first publishings. Most critics then called it the "Weakly Visitor", but the truth was that it became just as strong as its predecessors. Although its name changed several times, as well as its publishers, the Visitor lived through it all to become the state's second oldest newspaper by 1951. The home of the Visitor was located on what later became 55 West Santa Clara Street. Through the tough times that lay ahead for the young paper, Damon departed and Emerson continued on as publisher but later found a new editor, as well as a new name for the paper. A year later, on August 19, 1852, the Visitor became the Santa Clara Register. (4) At that same time, Emerson found a new partner and an

editor, Francis Butter Murdoch. The two owners did not get along well at all and found themselves in court, where Murdoch won and became sole proprietor on October 29, 1853. Little did he know that he would become one of San Jose's most respected journalists.

From the birthplace of the paper, the Register moved to First Street near Santa Clara Street and then back to Santa Clara Street. From there it moved to "Appleton's Building" on South Market Street and then again to Dr. P. Van Caneghim's building on North Market Street. After all the moving was finished, Murdoch changed the paper's name from the Register to the San Jose Telegraph on November 3, 1853, marking the arrival of the telegraph line in San Jose that occurred in the previous month. (5) The paper's business went well from then on, but apparently not well enough. Murdoch decided to sell the business to William Neil Slocum in 1860. Slocum changed the paper's name again, from the Telegraph to the San Jose Mercury. (6) Changes in the newspaper business influenced Slocum to sell to James Jerome Owen, shortly after the paper became the Mercury. This new beginning was marked by a statement signed by Slocum and Owen. It reported the change in ownership, as well as politics, being that Slocum was a Democrat and Owen, a Republican.

April 18, 1861 in the San Jose Mercury:

On or about the first of June, 1861, the undersigned, under the name of W.N. Slocum & Co. will commence the publication of a daily newspaper, to be called the San Jose Mercury, which, besides being a record of local affairs, will furnish, each morning a summary of news by telegraph, six or eight hours in

advance of the San Francisco journals. Although the Daily Mercury will be Republican in politics, the publishers will rely upon citizens of all parties for its support; and to this end, they will endeavor to make it so valuable even to Abolitionists and Secessionists, as well as to all who compose the "golden mean" between the two extremes. So far as general intelligence is concerned, all men may drink at the same fountain, and we believe can be united in the support of the same journal. (7)

The change in ownership brought the change of many opinions towards the paper as well as conflicts involving columns and editorials, which became livelier as time went on.

Now that "J.J." Owen had total ownership, he took on Benjamin Hinckley Cottle as his partner (during owner and name changes) and moved the paper to the Minor Building on the corner of First and El Dorado Street. From that location, for the first time, Owen experimented and placed the Mercury as a daily paper. But, it did not last long and the paper soon became a weekly regular again. (8)

Owen hoped his future contained expansions in every direction for the paper. With that in mind, he replaced the old 1200-impression-an - hour press for a new, faster model. And along with the new model, he also hired John J. Conmy, an expert pressman. With the new member, they called their printing company "J.J. Owen & Co".

Having more people, press, and years behind him, Owen again gave the daily idea a try for eight months and was unsuccessful. The little city of San Jose was not completely ready to support a daily newspaper. Owen

was happy to encourage any other newspaper to have the daily field.

A stranger to the city of San Jose, Norman Porter, tried the field with a new paper named the Daily Guide. It came to be that the cost was too hard on the little paper and he sold out to Owen on March 12, 1872. (9)

With Porter's paper under his belt, Owen explored the daily field once again. This time he actually succeeded and the San Jose Mercury became a weekly and a daily newspaper. With this expansion, Owen moved the paper from First Street to "Porter's Block, Santa Clara Street, near Second." He finally found his faults with the previous attempts to become a daily. His machinery was out of date and could not handle the amounts he needed to supply. With these findings, Owen purchased a steam-powered press on May 22, 1872. (10) This was followed by Cottle selling his share to Owen in the fall of 1873. The printing company then changed its name to Mercury Printing and Publishing Co. Throughout Owen's time with the Mercury, he wrote books and developed other interests in science. Consequently, in 1884, he sold his hard work along with the Mercury to Charles Shortridge, the publisher of the Morning Times. (11)

Charles Shortridge had combined his Morning Times and the newly acquired Mercury into a new paper named the Times-Mercury. (12) With the new owner, the paper's column amount increased per page and the paper itself grew larger. Next, Shortridge moved the paper to the Lyndon Block on Santa Clara Street, east of what would now be North Almaden Avenue, in San Jose's first official building used solely for the printing of

newspapers. He also purchased a 5,000-impression-per-hour Hoe press. But, just as it looked like Shortridge was a long term man, he sold out to F.A. Taylor, the publisher of the Republic, a local paper. (13)

As with Shortridge, along with Taylor came a new name for the paper. He dropped the hyphenated name Times-Mercury to the Mercury. By this time, the circulation had skyrocketed. And just when Taylor began to settle in, Shortridge came back, bought the paper back and took control. The next years with him and the Mercury were both hectic and promising ones. During those years, he published anniversary editions of the Mercury and in 1895 published a 320-page album titled, 'Sunshine, Fruit, and Flowers'. These were his final contributions in his Mercury "era".

In 1898, Clarence M. Wooster and Alfred Holman bought the paper from Shortridge. Shortridge had bought the paper from Owen for eight thousand dollars. In turn, he sold it to Wooster and Holman, for one hundred thousand dollars. Even though Shortridge had lost the paper, he had now aquired a heathly profit from a large part of his history.

Wooster and Holman continued to run the newspaper until 1900, when Wooster sold out to Holman. But, Holman could not keep up on his own. Everis Anson and Jay Orley Hayes, after aquiring the evening Herald, bought out Holman on August 20, 1901. "Red" and "Black" (nicknames for the Hayes brothers, who were distinguished by the colors of their beards), were very interested in local politics. (14) They made local business their business. Both being lawyers, they kept involved in the city's affairs and

helped out in the community.

The Hayes' brothers introduced a new way of producing the paper. At the end of 1901, they began to streamline the Mercury and the Herald in the same plant. This plant was located on Lightston Alley and it became a joint effort. Even later that year, the Mercury weekly was discontinued. Along with the movement of the plant, the Mercury offices joined them along Lightston Alley, coming from Santa Clara Street.

A monumental decision was made in 1913. The Hayes brothers decided to put the Herald on the back burner and at the same time combine it with the continuing Mercury, titling this "new effort" the San Jose Mercury Herald. That name stuck for thirty-seven years.

The newspaper moved again, in February of 1942, to the northern part of Santa Clara Street. It occupied the whole city block, remaining at this location until forced out by further expansions. The Hayes' sons soon joined the business, becoming co-publishers. At the end of 1942, the Mercury bought out its last competitor, the San Jose Evening News, and gained total power of the newspaper communications area. Both papers remained individual and they were published in the same plant. But, in 1952, the Hayes family sold both the Mercury and the News to Northwest Publications, operated by Bernard H. Ridder from the midwest. (15) The Hayes family gave up the equipment and the business but intelligently kept the land and the buildings upon it. Bernard Ridder's son, Joseph, took over the Mercury and the News as publisher of both, and the business, again,

expanded. Eventually they moved to a multimillion-dollar plant on Ridder Park Drive, previously known as Moses Schallenberger's farm. From here, they let the future come to them and soon found a 'permanent' home.

The Mercury News Since 1956

It was a new beginning coming along with the new location, new presses and new owners. In 1956, the Mercury-News earned national recognition for smart decisions during promotion choices. They were also awarded Certificates of Merit for best circulation and promotion ideas.

And along with the good times came the bad times. On February 14, 1959, Valentine's Day, the day of love, a little bit of hate forced the union members of the Mercury and the News to go on strike at 8:00 pm. It was the first strike against the Mercury in 108 years. They walked out, starting a wage war, which led to the laying off of six hundred people. The union demanded eleven dollars a week and was given a compromise of seven, which they refused. The strike ended the week of March 24, 1959, a relief after a long, tenuous strike, with the terms unknown to the public.

In both 1961 and 1962, the Mercury-News won four publishers' awards and were named one of "California's Most Honored Newspapers". They also won for having the best business page. This was just the beginning for the long line of awards for this highly regarded newspaper.

In 1972, public schools began to use the Mercury-News as "A Living Textbook". It is used as a guide to aid students in relating learning to real-life situations. The program became very popular and is currently used in many schools throughout California.

Then, in 1974, the Ridders merged with the Knight Newspapers and this new combination organized thirty-five papers, which they publish, and became the largest combined circulation in the United States. For the first time ever, the Mercury-News was made part of a large newspaper chain. After the merger, in July 1975, the Ridders redecorated the local papers with modern technology. Joseph B. Ridder became president of the Mercury-News with his nephew, Tony Ridder, moving from general manager to publisher in 1977. Joseph Ridder proved to be active in the local communities by contributing funds and taking on a leadership role.

These Knight-Ridder publications seemed to be publishing smoothly and the owners were pleased. But to make the owners even more content, in 1986, the Mercury-News for the first time won a Pulitzer Prize for the three part series: "Hidden Billions: The Draining of the Philippines", published June 23-25, 1985. The three reporters who received the honors were Katherine Ellison, Pete Carey, and Lewis M. Simons. The prize was for their investigation on how leaders of the Philippines had drained large sums of money from the country over the past two decades. This prize was the first won by a Northern California daily newspaper since 1956.

(16) This was just another notch on the belt of one of the most highly read

newspapers in San Jose, the Mercury-News.

As the paper moved farther along in the changing times, it encountered many of the realities of conflicts and confrontations. In 1986, the Mercury News had a libel suit of 7.5 million dollars by San Jose Councilman Claude Fletcher for writing about his involvement with a contract gone sour. The details of that were settled in court later that year. And again in 1986, an ex-editor of the Mercury-News sued the paper for an alleged age bias. He accused the paper of denying him the promotion to assistant business editor because of his age and gender. The job instead was granted to a twenty-nine year old woman. John Hamnet, senior vice-president of the paper denied all allegations of discrimination. His response was, "Qualifications are the determining factor, not seniority."

(17)

Hamnet was demanded by the U.S. District Court in San Jose to employ the ex-editor as assistant business editor and pay him lost wages and benefits. This marked the beginning of the paper's share of discrimination and other types of cases.

Along with everything involving the paper comes the questions of money. The Mercury-News had the easy life of being bought by people who could say money wasn't the object. But with the present came the problems of money. The paper, like just about every other company in the U.S., had to tighten the funds when it came to buying and expanding. The recession of 1992-93 caused the paper to conserve money because sales

were down and saving was the sign of the times.

Another sign of the times was the Mercury-News' decision to publish certain articles in different languages. It has so far been translated into Spanish and Vietnamese because of their large communities. This gives the paper opportunities to reach out and communicate with other cultures. Opportunities like these were easily granted to the Mercury-News because it is such a distinguished newspaper and is so highly regarded. And of course the paper welcomed any opportunity, because the paper is so involved with local areas, as well as outside San Jose. Later on in its career, the Mercury-News won more honorable awards for reporting as well as documentaries and is commended for such involvement with its people.

The San Jose Mercury News is one of the nation's most read newspaper. It has been and still is a main communication highway for the city of San Jose and the state of California. The paper's achievement and recognition has been noticed by many. That is why society buys a copy along with their doughnut and cup of coffee or deposits a couple of quarters in the slots to take home something to read on the lightrail or read together with their family. It has become society's printed telephone to the local and outside world. That is exactly what made the San Jose Mercury News as popular as it is today.

Notes

1. San Jose Mercury, (San Jose, California, J.J. Owen & Co., 1861).
2. Clyde Arbuckle, History of San Jose, (San Jose, California, Smith McKay Printing Co. Inc., 1986), pg. 397.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid, pg. 398.
7. San Jose Mercury, Op. Cit., pg. 1.
8. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., pg. 398.
9. Ibid, pg.398.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, pg.399.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid, pg.400.
16. "Ex-Mercury News Editor Sues, Alleges Age Bias", San Jose Mercury News (December 22, 1988, pg.8B).
17. Ibid, pg. 8B.

Bibliography

- Arbuckle, Clyde, History of San Jose, San Jose: Smith McKay Printing Co., 1986.
- Brockway, Edith, San Jose Reflections, Campbell, CA.: Academy Press, 1977
- "Inside Edition", San Jose Metro, pg. 9, February 2-8, 1995.
- "Mercury News Asks Judge to Dismiss Fletcher's Libel Suit", San Jose Mercury News, pg. 3B, June 13, 1986.
- "Mercury News Committed to Valley Future", San Jose Mercury News, pg.14C, January 30, 1972.
- "Prospectus", San Jose Mercury, April 18, 1861.
- San Jose Bicentennial Commision, A Century of Service, San Jose: Smith McKay Printing Co., 1977.
- "Strike Closes San Jose Papers", San Francisco Chronicle, pg.1, February 15, 1959.
- "Why We Run Stories in Other Languages", San Jose Mercury News, pgs. 1C-3C, April 16, 1995.

Willow Glen High School

Mrs. Kathryn Philp