



COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Composing room workers set linotype at the turn of the 20th century.



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The Sunday Magazine, featuring "Revival of the Death Penalties," rolls in February 1902.

The changing face of the Rocky



APRIL 23, 1859

Volume 1, No. 1 rolled off William Byers' press in the attic of a general store on 11th Street. The edition was four pages; the first editorial said, "Fondly looking forward to a long and pleasant acquaintance with our readers, hoping well to act our part, we send forth to the world the first number of the *Rocky Mountain News*."

The original page measures about 16 by 33 inches.

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In 1858, Uncle Dick Wooton's log store was the only two-story structure among the settlements of Denver City, Auraria and St. Charles. Minister William Goode was sowing the seeds of the Denver City Methodist Episcopal Mission, today known as Trinity Church.

When 28-year-old William Newton Byers rolled into town with a printing press in the back of a wagon he had driven from Omaha, he first set up shop on the top floor of Wooton's store.

The night of April 23, 1859, Byers and his crew of three printed the first *Rocky Mountain News*, a single sheet of four pages.

Denver looked like it was here to stay. No one was quite ready to say the same about the *Rocky*. Certainly five years later, if some sodden observer, standing on the banks of swollen Cherry Creek watching as the *Rocky's* building and printing press bobbed past in the tide of less substantial flood debris, dared to wager the newspaper would last so long, he would have been swiftly covered by the umbrellas of bettors stampeding down Market Street.

Scrapping for King Kong status

So how did the newspapers survive its early, impossible years? It was useful.

Shopkeepers and sellers of liver cures had to advertise. Men wanted jobs. Jobs needed men. The new territorial government voted on something every day. Gold begged to be uncovered. The circus was coming. Men were choosing sides for a civil war. Someone had to push the burning garbage dumps out of town. The railroad was coming. Everyone wanted to know what the Indians were doing. Women wanted the vote. People liked to gossip.

Before the end of the century the *Rocky's* circulation was more than 25,000 — even at a time when Denver was bursting with newspaper competition. By 1890, the city's population had reached 107,000 and it had six dailies, 27 weeklies and 22 monthlies to choose from.

Byers owned the paper only 19 years before selling. Four other owners followed, among them U.S. Sen. Thomas M. Patterson. In 1906, the Scripps-McRae League joined the fray by starting the daily *Denver Express*. The cost of fighting so many upstarts steadily eroded the *Rocky's* position

of dominance. By the mid-1920s, the paper's circulation was 30,000; its fiercest rival, *The Denver Post*, was selling 160,000. Scripps-McRae evolved into Scripps-Howard, and in 1926 the chain bought the *Rocky*. It might have guessed that the real newspaper war was about to begin.

The Cincinnati-based owner merged the *Rocky's* afternoon stepchild, *The Denver Times*, with the struggling *Express* to create the *Denver Evening News* in order to compete head-on with *The Post*.

The evening *Post* counterattacked by launching the *Morning Post*. In the next two years the two newspaper gorillas spent an estimated \$5 million, each trying to claim the title of King Kong. It worked for the *Rocky* — for a time. Daily circulation climbed to 40,000 daily and 94,000 Sunday.

But the "war" couldn't last, at least not on the business front. The *Rocky*, which had spent \$3 million, killed its evening edition; *The Post* folded its morning paper. Back then, it was called a truce. Seventy years later, a similar joint business agreement would be called the same thing but would have far greater consequence.

Reborn in tabloid form

In the 1930s, both businesses slipped back into their morning-evening ways, which meant the *Rocky* went back to losing money. The two editorial staffs, always as different as day and night, fought like mutts for stories every day. Both newspapers were full-size broadsheets. But Scripps-Howard lost another half-million dollars — Great Depression dollars — keeping the paper afloat.

In 1940, Scripps-Howard dispatched a new editor to Denver. The staff believed Jack Foster was coming to close the paper. Instead, the fedora-wearing Foster ordered better comics, more features, resuscitated the paper's local reporting and introduced radio listings.

It wasn't enough. Maybe Foster hadn't come to shut down the paper, but it looked like he might turn off the lights after all.

So how did the newspaper survive its midlife crisis, the impossible years?

It reinvented itself, decades before that became a catchphrase.

Bill Hailey, the *Rocky's* business manager, had an idea. Maybe it came to him one morning over breakfast, peering through

horned-rim spectacles at his newspaper, or riding the bus to work on Welton Street. Make the *Rocky* a tabloid, Hailey said — smaller, easier to handle. Advertisers would get better display. (We'll come back to this.) And at almost half the size of *The Post*, it would use much less newsprint.

On April 13, 1942 — 83 years, almost to the day, after Byers' first edition — the *Rocky* printed its first newspaper similar to present-day size. A boxed headline and note on the front page explained to readers:

HERE WE ARE!

"At 7:30 last night the first edition of this modern-tempo newspaper rolled from the presses, and a new era in Western journalism began. As Denver has moved into the war effort, so has the *Rocky Mountain News* moved into an accelerated form reflective of the tremendous currents surging within the heart of this nation.

"... We shall try — and will — do better."

It worked. Within five months, circulation shot up to 48,000 daily, 53,500 Sunday. By 1950, the *Rocky* was at 133,000 copies a day and making *The Post* nervous. *Rocky* staffers were calling themselves "the wildcats on Welton Street."

By 1977, *The Post's* once seemingly untouchable daily circulation lead had shrunk to 6,900 copies.

Hailey guided the business side of the newspaper for 15 years more. When he died in 1965 his body was cremated, and his ashes were interred in the main lobby wall of the *Rocky's* West Colfax Avenue building. When the newspaper moved to its present location at West Colfax and Broadway in 2006, the ashes were removed and interred elsewhere by the family.

A newsroom on spin cycle

I'd like to tell you the rest of the *Rocky's* history from personal experience. I joined the paper in 1973 and worked the next 34 years for Scripps in Colorado.

I was hired by sports editor Bob Collins. Two years out of San Francisco State College, I had been stalking Collins for more

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APRIL 13, 1942

In a strategy to combat circulation decline, the *Rocky* switched formats from broadsheet to tabloid. Business Manager H.W. "Bill" Hailey thought the change would make a more convenient product for readers and give better display to advertisers. In five months, paper sales increased from about 30,000 to 48,200.