



ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS/2003

Staffers cheer after learning that the *Rocky* won the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Colorado forest fires. From bottom left: Randall Roberts, George Kochanic, Janet Reeves and Ken Papaleo.



BARRY GUTIERREZ/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Pressmen adjust equipment as the first *Rocky Mountain News* editions roll off new state-of-the-art presses on Jan. 22, 2007.

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On May 11, 2000, *The Post* and the *Rocky* declared the second truce in their history, this time officially and legally. They forged what is known in the industry as a joint operating agreement, or JOA. The objective was for rival newspapers to merge their business and production operations, thereby reducing expenses, and split revenue. The Denver Newspaper Agency was created to perform this function. The two newsrooms, still owned by MediaNews and Scripps, respectively, continued to independently report the news.

This has been the fate of several former two-newspaper cities such as Birmingham, Ala.; Charleston, S.C.; Evansville, Ind.; Detroit; Las Vegas; Miami; Pittsburgh; and Seattle. In half these cities, one of the papers eventually closed.

As part of the Denver JOA, *The Post* took over printing the Sunday edition, and the *Rocky* inherited sole Saturday publication. This put the *Rocky* at a huge disadvantage because historically the Sunday paper dominates overall circulation, plus the *Rocky* was saddled with printing the Saturday paper in *The Post's* broadsheet format — not the favorite of *Rocky* readers — for production reasons.

If good news travels fast, bad news in the newspaper business travels faster than light. It felt like the first words of the JOA pronouncement reached us in Boulder before Scripps' president completed his sentence in Denver.

My other thought in Boulder at the time was the irony of the timing. Only one month earlier, the *Rocky* had won its first Pulitzer Prize for its photography during the Columbine High School shooting and aftermath, and the paper was still locked in a virtual tie for the circulation lead. In terms of readership, the paper had never

been stronger.

It had never been more useful.

'Status quo is not going to work'

Hindsight, though, proves that the backdrop for these events was the beginning of an economic downturn across America. Retail advertising was in a slump, and the ominous roar of a national housing slump was rushing toward Colorado like a Front Range chinook.

Sept. 11, 2001, may not have had the slightest bearing on the outcome of what by comparison was just a newspapersquabble in Denver. But in my mind's eye, I will forever see those smoking towers in New York as one of the bookmarkers in my life. Things changed. We travel differently; we open the mail more carefully; we stand in longer lines; we're content with \$3-a-gallon gas. We went on a flag-waving binge; now, not so much.

And, even though such events have nothing to do with it, Denver will now be a one-newspaper city for the first time in more than 100 years.

Executives at Scripps' two Colorado papers used to joke with their corporate counterparts whenever they came to town, chuckling tongue-in-cheek together that it usually didn't mean good news.

When Rich Boehne, president and CEO of Scripps, arrived in town last Dec. 4, he did not come in the role of Jack Foster.

"We're not here today to close the paper," Boehne told the *Rocky* newsroom. "We're here today to say the status quo is not going to work."

Boehne estimated that the paper would lose \$15 million in 2008. Even more shocking, *Rocky* editor, president and publisher John Temple wrote later, more than \$100 million in classified revenue had been lost since the formation of the JOA.

Circulation had been in a tailspin in the industry for at least a decade. However, in 2007, only eight other states reported higher total newspaper circulation than Colorado. On the day of Scripps' announcement, the *Rocky* reported daily circulation of 210,000 — about 10,000 more than *The Post* after discounted papers are stripped away.

Nevertheless, Scripps set an unspecified mid-January deadline for a potential buyer to come forward or the newspaper could be closed.

And that's exactly what happened, with today being the very last edition after almost 150 years.

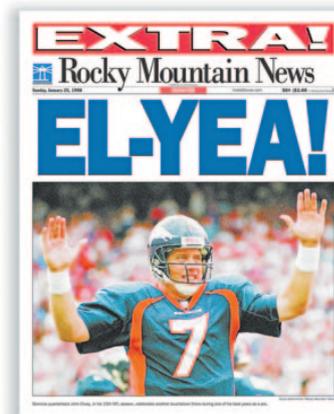
It is fair to say that circumstances similar to those that enabled William Byers to breathe life into his newspaper contributed to its demise: the emergence of a more nimble mass communication system that possesses the 21st century perk of being nearly instantaneous. There's no denying, the Internet is useful.

That takes nothing away from the thousands of employees whose words and vision and craft gave readers in Denver and Colorado, and oftentimes beyond, something to help their lives every morning.

Readers and rivals alike will recognize they have lost something very special Saturday, when they wake to find only one newspaper on doorsteps across Colorado.

■ **POSTSCRIPT:** The highest circulation ever reported by the *Rocky Mountain News* appeared in the March 2000 Audit Bureau of Circulations — 446,465 daily, 552,085 Sunday. According to the World Association of Newspapers, the *Rocky* was the 21st oldest newspaper in America.

Michael Madigan is a former assistant managing editor at the Rocky.



FEW. 25, 1998
JUNE 4, 2005

Unique headlines and award-winning headline writers are a *Rocky* trademark, with the staff consistently searching for the words to draw readers to each story. One man personified the Broncos' long march to their first Super Bowl victory, John Elway, thus, the EL-YEA! that bannered an EXTRA! distributed after the game. When John Hickenlooper was elected mayor of Denver, newsroom debate raged over the proposed "Hick town" banner headline. Too familiar? Too cute? Too risky? We went with it.



DEC. 4, 2008

A redesign launched in 2007 brought change to the nameplate: The mountain image got bigger and a red rectangle spotlighted *Rocky*, the nickname many in Colorado used for the newspaper.

For this particular edition, we found ourselves in the headlines. Representatives of E.W. Scripps, our corporate parent, flew to Denver to announce the company was putting the *Rocky* up for sale.

The front page featured a grim lineup of staffers trying to absorb the news while Editor John Temple answered questions at an afternoon newsroom meeting.