History of Northern Territory Regional Newspapers

The Northern Territory of South Australia

When the first Northern Territory newspaper appeared in 1873, it was published at Palmerston, the town the South Australian Government originally intended would be the capital of the Territory. [i] The Northern Territory Times & Gazette began publication in November 1873 with a two-page issue, rushed out to catch the mails to the south. Even though the issue was dated Friday, 7 November, it was actually printed on Saturday the 8th.

At half-Past 12 o'clock, Mr Scott, the Government Resident, at the request of Messrs Wells and Clarkson, kindly came down and printed the first copy at the press now in use, and, as this copy was taken from the forme and exhibited to the delighted crowd who stood by, a hearty cheer was given for the Northern Territory Times—the first newspaper ever printed on this side of the Australian continent. [ii]

Printer George Thompson Clarkson rushed through the two-page first issue so that he did not 'lose the opportunity of sending the earliest possible news to the other colonies'. The difficulty of getting out the paper hastily in 'this remote settlement' had been extreme, he said. 'We had only five clear days in which to land our machinery, type, &c., and to get everything ready for the issue of the first paper, and that, too, during the hottest period in the year of a tropical climate.' [iii] Clarkson had been a founder of the first newspaper in the Wallaroo-Moonta copper-mining area of South Australia's Yorke Peninsula in 1865. [iv]

By 1911, when the Northern Territory was separated from South Australia and handed over to the Commonwealth, only two NT newspapers had been published: the Northern Territory Times and the North Australian, Darwin (1883-1890). A third newspaper emerged on 19 February 1921 when the North Australian Workers Union launched the Northern Standard. It remained in print until 1955 apart from four years after the bombing of Darwin in February 1942. Shortly after the end of World War II the first provincial newspapers in the NT began publication: the Dead Heart, an Alice Springs weekly, was launched on 29 July 1946 and closed on 4 March 1947. The Centralian Advocate, which replaced it on 24 May 1947, began life as a weekly and became a bi-weekly on 4 March 1981. The Advocate had a difficult early life. Its printery was destroyed by fire in the early hours of 16 January 1950 a few days after the paper had editorially deplored the lack of a fire engine in the town. Robert Watt says the Advocate played a game of musical chairs with various offices, among them the town's first butcher's shop and a former garage. 'Editors came and went almost as often as the frequent dust storms that hit the town.' [v] An early editor was James Frederick Bowditch (1920-1996) who was in the chair from 1952-1954 before he made a name for himself as a crusading editor at the Northern Territory News, 1954-1973. [vi]

The founder of the Advocate was a Territory pioneer, Charles Henry Chapman, who went there in July 1932 from Roma, Queensland, where he had been a well sinker. He was one of the first men to go to The Granites goldfield which experienced a short boom later. Chapman died in 1955 and the Advocate was formed into a company soon after to consolidate finance. News Limited acquired the company in 1966. The paper has been printed in Darwin at the NT News since the issue of 26 October 1968. [vii] The Advocate has had competition from a free weekly, the Alice Springs News, since 3 March 1994.

Outside of Alice Springs, Katherine has had the largest NT country paper, the Katherine Times. But it was not Katherine's first. The Katherine Informer began in 1974 and became the Katherine Advertiser in May 1979. On 16 June 1983, Vince Fardone and John McDonald launched the town's first tabloid newspaper, the Katherine Times, in a bid to give the locals a newspaper that would both inform and entertain. The Katherine Herald was established, too, making the field a crowded one (all three papers were weeklies), but Fardone says the Herald survived only five issues. Fardone had a photographic mini-processing lab, which was expected to subsidise the Katherine Times as it set out to gain acceptance and credibility with local readers. Fardone and McDonald had 5,000 copies of the
first issue printed and they used a yellow mini-Moke to distribute complimentary copies. Both the mini-lab and the newspaper flourished and the paper was making a profit in “a very short time”. The tourist trade made the photo lab sustainable. In 1985, McDonald sold his interest in the Times to his partner; Vince Fardone and wife Jill owned the paper until 22 October 2008 when they sold to Fairfax Media. [viii]

Other country newspapers established in the Territory in the second half of the 20th century were: the Tennant Creek Times, which began on 25 May 1956 and ceased in December 1957 and which was replaced by the Tennant & District Times from 10 November 1978; the Jabiru Rag, 6 October 1983; the Litchfield Times on 31 October 1985; and the Arafura Times, Nhulunbuy, on 16 May 1996. The Litchfield paper expanded its horizons in 2005, renaming itself the Territory Times on 17 February and taking a suitably broad news and distribution outlook. The Litchfield Times itself began life on the fringes of Darwin in 1983 as the Humpty Doo and Rural Area Times. Founder Val Smith, still the proprietor in 2005, hoped to make the Territory Times a bi-weekly by 2015. Smith said that rather than giving Litchfield Shire less attention, the paper would expand its cover of the rest of the Territory. [ix] Hed dream did not become a reality and from April 2008, the title reverted to the Litchfield Times. In 2012, weekly or more frequently issued country newspapers were being published in the Territory at: Alice Springs, Nhulunbuy, Jabiru, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Litchfield.

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[i] Palmerston is near modern-day Darwin and has become a satellite city to its better known neighbour.

[ii] Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 14 November 1873, p.2.

[iii] Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 7 November 1873, p.2.

[iv] The Wallaroo Times was launched on 1 February 1865 and is the main ancestor of today's Yorke Peninsula Country Times.


