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MARION COUNTY NEWSPAPERS

by R. N. DOSH

THE FLORIDA PRESS ASSOCIATION, in celebrating the 75th anniversary of that organization, asked me to prepare a history of the *Ocala Star-Banner*. The article prepared at that time has been revised somewhat and brought up to date.

Any article dealing with the *Star-Banner* has to be, to some extent, a history of the newspapers of Marion County, because of the personalities of the men and women who have been connected with the *Ocala Banner*, the *Ocala Evening Star* and other newspapers published in the county over a period of 88 years or more. Thus, it will be seen that the Marion County newspapers ante-date the Florida Press Association.

Editors, owners and publishers of Marion County newspapers were not only interested in the business as a means of making a livelihood. They took an active part in the civic and business affairs of the county and its politics, some having held public office.

Over the span of the years, they materially assisted in the development of its agricultural and industrial resources, and were prominently identified with its educational and religious life. They have ever been in the forefront of those advocating and supporting progressive programs for the economic and cultural betterment of humanity in all walks of life.

Holding stature as dean of the newspaper profession in the county was the venerable and highly respected Francis Eppes Harris, who established the *Ocala Weekly Banner* in 1866 and was its editor and owner for 62 years. The *Ocala Banner* was not only the oldest newspaper in Marion County, but it was of the longest existence under the control of one family in Florida.

It was in continuous publication, and under the ownership of the Harris family, from the date of its establishment until its successor, the *Ocala Morning Banner*, was sold to John H. Perry, Sr. on March 2, 1943. Perry purchased the *Ocala Evening Star* in September of the same year, and the two papers were merged under the name of the *Ocala Star-Banner*.

In its early days, the *Banner* office was located on the west

side of Main Street, a short distance from the Fort King intersection. It was a well equipped office for that day.

Readers of this article will be surprised to learn that about 1886 the Stovall brothers, Wallace, who later established the Tampa Tribune, which he built into southwest Florida's leading daily, and his brother, Tom, published the *Marion Free Press*, also a weekly. They printed their paper on a hand press and did the mechanical work themselves.

About 1887, Milton F. Hood acquired the *Florida Baptist Witness* which had been published in DeLand and moved it to Ocala, where it remained until 1903.

In the late 1890's, "Colonel" Tom Harris established the *New Capitol* when there was a movement on foot to move the state capital from Tallahassee to a more central Florida city. In 1900 a capital removal election was held, with Ocala and several other cities contending with Tallahassee, but sentiment for capital removal was divided among the contenders. A majority of the votes cast favored retention of Tallahassee as the capital.

In 1890 or thereabouts, after phosphate was found in Dunnellon, and the little west Florida town became a booming mining center, Eugene Matthews established the *Dunnellon News*. Matthews was an outspoken editor, almost too outspoken for some people, chief among them being a wealthy citizen who had leased a large number of state convicts and then subleased them to the owners of phosphate mines near Dunnellon. The convicts were brutally treated. Matthews printed something about it, which displeased the mine owners, or some of them. Under threats and pressure Matthews sold out his paper and came to Ocala to become a compositor on the New Capitol.

(Eugene Matthews later established the *Starke Telegraph*, was elected to the Legislature from Bradford County, and if memory serves, was appointed to the State Railroad Commission by Governor Hardee, and served in that capacity for many years until he retired due to ill health.)

The *New Capitol* was a newsy newspaper. It took an afternoon press service from what was the predecessor of the Associated Press. As it was a morning newspaper, this would be a joke now - the paper received its dispatches about 4 p.m. and issued them to its readers before 7 o'clock the next morning.

The town depended on the Jacksonville *Times-Union* for

outside news. The paper arrived between 1 and 2 p.m. The Jacksonville *Metropolis* carried the same dispatches as the *New Capitol*, but did not reach Ocala before 2 or 3 a.m. the following day and was distributed to its readers about the same time the *New Capitol* was delivered.

During a short period between 1886 and 1892 the *Banner* issued a daily, but Harris did not find it paid and wisely discontinued publication.

In 1893 the *Banner* moved to the building it occupied when it ceased publication on North Main Street just across the street from the present location of the *Star-Banner*. Joining Harris as business manager was C. L. Bittinger, who had engaged in school work.

Among the *Banner* office "force" were Port V. Leavengood and Simeon Lummus. (Lummus later executed a contract for purchase of the *Banner*, but gave it up after a short time.) Both Bittinger and Leavengood became associated with and were part owners of the *Ocala Evening Star*, which had made its appearance as a daily in 1895.

The Stovall brothers had gone to other fields. In 1892 they were running a weekly in Bartow, and in 1893 Wallace F. Stovall established the *Tampa Tribune*.

The *Free Press*, established by the Stovalls, in 1892 was under the management of Louis J. Brumby. Later Brumby, who had a flair for feature writing, established a magazine type publication which I believe he called the *Florida Agriculturist*. It was the forerunner of the *Florida Grower* and similar publications of today.

The *Florida Baptist Witness*, which was moved to Ocala in 1887, had developed into the most influential church paper of the state. It had come under the ownership of J. C. Porter, who toured the state, spoke in Baptist churches and built up the *Witness* by his personal work. He was highly educated and rated as an excellent writer, and made the paper interesting for the Baptists.

The *Witness* office was located in an old ramshackle wooden structure on the east side of Main Street, immediately south of the old First Methodist Church. The old building became a fire hazard and was torn down.

Meanwhile, Porter raised money among the Baptists to build a three-story brick building on the corner of Fort King Avenue

and Osceola Street. (The building is now occupied by the county health clinic.) It was in this building that the *Ocala Evening Star* came into existence.

Mention should be made here that in the late 1890s when the village of Silver Springs Park flourished, there was a small newspaper published there. The only reason it is mentioned is that it was here Robert W. Bentley learned to set type. Bentley later went to New York where he became a writer on the *Journal*, I believe. Returning to Florida, he occupied the position of managing editor of the *Tampa Times* and also of the *Tampa Tribune*, and established the *Bradenton Herald*. Bentley was chairman of the State Road Department in the Carlton administration, and later returned to Bradenton to become publisher of the *Herald* under the new ownership.

In 1893, J. H. Benjamin, who had been working on the *New Capitol*, joined the *Witness* force as foreman, and was later to become editor of the *Ocala Evening Star*.

The *New Capitol* had a vicarious career. It went from one owner to another, under one name and another. J. V. Burke, a phosphate man, somewhat renowned as a politician in the Catts regime, controlled it for a while, and at one time it was operated by Jake Israel, an Ocala merchant, who renamed it the *Mail and Express*. The exact date of its suspension is not remembered.

Late in 1894 and early in 1895 came the disastrous freeze that seemed for a time to have rung the death knell for the citrus industry. Coupled with the freeze, the two Ocala banks closed their doors. Another Ocala resource, which had been slowly dwindling since 1893, failed entirely in 1895. This was Marti City, where a thriving cigar industry had been established. One by one the factories closed down and family after family of Cuban cigar workers moved to Tampa. The entire colony was deeply in sympathy with the Cuban patriots and many of the younger men were pledged to fight in the Cuban cause. In 1895 the last Cuban revolution broke out and a few weeks later the once flourishing Marti City was abandoned.

It was in the midst of this scarcity, the worst ever to hit Marion County, that a new star in Marion County's firmament was born. On June 5, 1895, the *Ocala Evening Star* was born in the Baptist *Witness* office. It was set up with *Witness* type and printed on the *Witness* Press. J. C. Porter of the *Witness*

and Abraham Lincoln Harding of Kansas City were the proprietors.

But the man who built up the *Star* was Robert R. Carroll, who came to Ocala from Mississippi. He was part owner, business manager, local editor and everything and all things, including commercial printing solicitor and payroll raiser.

Later on C. L. Bittinger, who had been business manager of the *Banner*, joined the *Star* family and became a partner, purchasing Porter's interest. The masthead carried the line, "Bittinger & Carroll," Bittinger assuming the title of editor.

A sidelight of the *Star* may be of interest. The circulation was small at first, and delivery was within a small radius. The first and only carrier boy for a time was young B. S. "Benjie" Weathers, member of a prominent family. He was then about 14 years old and delivered his papers on a pony. (B. J. Weathers served for many years as vice president of the Florida National Bank of Jacksonville, and was one of the state's leading financiers.)

J. H. Benjamin, boss of the *Witness* composing room, became the guiding genius of the *Evening Star*, acting as managing editor and foreman. He edited all the copy that went into the paper, padded out the skeleton telegraph service and supplemented it with "clipped dispatches" from the big morning dailies.

When Bittinger joined the *Evening Star* in 1897, he at once began to build up the newly founded *Weekly Star*, which was to the people of Marion County what the *Evening Star* was to the people of Ocala. Most of the mechanical equipment of the *New Capitol* was purchased by the *Star*, including a small pony Potter press, which was put to good use in the commercial printing department.

There was little change in the personnel of the *Star* for several years. But in 1903-4, a big gap was made in the ranks, when J. C. Porter went home, never to return. During his illness he sold the *Baptist Witness* to W. L. Mahon who removed it to Jacksonville. Some six or seven years later, after the *Witness* had been battered around from pillar to post, its temporary owner, F. C. Edwards, brought it back to be published in its old home. In a few months the paper was again removed to a new location.

Some time early in the 1900s the *Banner* again started publishing a daily. Colonel Harris was the editor, his daughter, Miss Sarah Harris (now Mrs. S. H. Lloyd, residing in Jackson-

ville), society and local editor and Port V. Leavengood, business manager.

The *Weekly Star*, which was changed in form to a tabloid and was edited for a while by Al. Cody, now publisher of the *Florida Cattleman*, and the *Weekly Banner* were discontinued in the 1930's when the *Morning Banner* and the *Evening Star* began to extend their coverage into the county by establishing motor routes.

I can only make mention of two small weeklies that were published at McIntosh in North Marion County and at Summerfield in the southern end of the county. P. W. Collens, who came to Florida from Pennsylvania, edited the *Summerfield Chronicle*, which was printed on a job press; and a Mr. Hendrix published the *North Marion News*. They were in circulation during the 1920's. Both papers were well edited and filled with news of these two communities. They were discontinued some time after Collens and Hendrix died.

In 1911 the *Star* suffered a great loss in the death of C. L. Bittinger, a just, kind and public spirited man, well beloved by the citizens of Ocala and Marion County.

His dead, however, did not sever his name from the masthead of the *Star*. His widow, Mrs. Helen J. Bittinger, continued to hold an interest in the paper, and their daughter, Mabel Adele, a few years later became society editor. (At the time this is being written, Miss Bittinger is writing the column, "From the Old Files," which appears in the *Star-Banner* twice weekly.

There was no great change in the *Star* with the passing of Bittinger. J. H. Benjamin, in addition to acting as foreman, became editor. Their ideas were similar and there was no change in policy. Benjamin, who was a student of history, well informed on national and international affairs, and gifted with the ability to write barbed comments, soon made a name for himself as the "Ocala editor who never pulls his punches." His short paragraphs, which were pungent and sometimes barbed, were widely quoted in other papers.

"Uncle Ben" did more work than any man I have ever been associated with. He not only "ran" the news end of the paper, but did most of the work himself, making up the forms and editing all copy that went into the paper. After his day's work was done on the floor, he would take a short nap in the late afternoon, and

after supper sit down at his desk to do his editorial work. Never during the time he was editor of the *Star* did anything but original matter appear in the first column on the editorial page.

In 1906 the writer left the composing room of the *Banner*, which was publishing a six-column, four page daily, with "patent" front page shipped in from Atlanta by express every day, and joined the *Star* staff where in the capacity of makeup man and compositor I remained for some 18 years.

I had learned my trade at the "case" in the *Banner* office and felt at home in my new surroundings. I immediately formed a lasting friendship with and love for J. H. Benjamin, my mentor and adviser. "Uncle Ben", as he was known to everybody, was a lovable character, liked and respected by everybody.

As the *Star* had a limited staff, everybody gathered the local news. Occasionally when I would attend a political meeting, or some local event, Benjamin would insist that I write the "story." This I did, using the linotype as my typewriter. This training stood me in good stead when, out of a clear sky one day, I was asked to accept the position of editor of the *Star*. More about that later.

In 1917 Port Leavengood, who had been for years with the *Banner*, bought an interest in the *Star* and became its business manager. Trained as a printer, he could do any and everything around a printing office. He wrote news stories, solicited advertising, collected the bills and, on occasion, when we were in a tight spot, put on his apron and came into the composing room to set ads. He wrote a good news story, and made friends readily.

Louis H. Chazal, one of the most dedicated newspaper men I have ever known, served on the *Star* as a reporter for some months before the United States went into World War I. He learned the newspaper business on the South Carolina State at Columbia.

After the war, Chazal was connected with advertising agencies in Philadelphia and St. Petersburg, but newspapering was his first love, and he again joined the *Star* staff in 1932. Chazal not only served as the No. 1 reporter on the *Star* but also divided time on the editorial desk with the editor.

Louis Chazal, in collaboration with Mrs. Edith Ott, now a resident of Lake Weir, has been engaged for the past 25 years

in writing a history of Marion County. These two have gathered more information about Marion County than has ever been set down on paper before. It is their hope that they can find means to publish this history for use in the Marion County schools.

Chazal, who suffered a heart attack about two years ago, still does some writing for the *Star-Banner* which appears on the editorial page. He was associate editor before his enforced retirement.

In the early autumn of 1919, the *Star* left the building where it was born and worked faithfully and generally well for 24 years and moved to its present location on North Main Street, just across from the *Banner* office.

Not long after the *Star* moved to its new location, Robert R. Carroll left us to become interested in the automobile business. He had the agency for the Chalmers and Maxwell line of cars and trucks, and was making money. Unfortunately, Carroll over extended himself, with business booming and when the slump came, he lost everything he had, including his stock in the Star Publishing Company. Shortly afterwards he moved to Sarasota, where he became associated with the *Times* under the Reagin ownership, I believe. A few years later he died.

Mention should be made of the newspapers published in Dunnellon, under various owners. Some time in the early 1900's there was a paper in Dunnellon called the *Hornet*, edited by an old preacher who used language witty and ungrammatical enough to attract attention, but there was very little sting in the *Hornet* outside of its name. The *Hornet* was moved to Dunnellon from High Springs.

Some time after the *Hornet* suspended, another paper appeared. Its name was the *Advocate* and it was made up and printed in the *Ocala Star* office. Its editor was Quincy Peacock, who came from Williston. The *Advocate* suspended after a short period and for some years Dunnellon did not have a paper.

In the early 1920's George Adams, a veteran newspaper man from South Florida, brought an outfit to Dunnellon and started the *Truth*, a small but live newspaper. He did very well until his health failed, when the paper passed to his wife and daughter.

The *Truth* was bought by Mrs. Iva T. Sprinkle, who already owned three papers in various parts of the state. She later served

two terms as superintendent of public instruction in Marion County, and more recently held the same office in Duval County.

On November 28, 1928, "Colonel Frank" Harris, who had become known as the "nester of the Florida press," passed to his reward. He had retired in June of that year and his son, Frank Harris, Jr., had taken over the management and operation of the *Banner*, which then was a weekly.

"Colonel Frank." as he was affectionately called by legions of friends, was buried in the uniform of a general of the Army of the Confederacy, having served as a boy in the War Between the States.

Shortly after his death, in June of the same year, Harris Powers, his grandson who had just graduated from Northwestern University, came to Ocala and started the *Ocala Morning Banner*. He installed two linotypes and a Goss flatbed press, started taking the United Press service and began putting out an up-to-date, newsy sheet.

In the early part of 1926, when the Silver Springs Corporation leased the Springs property from Ray & Davidson, stockholders in the corporation established the *Central Florida Times*, located in the building just in the rear of the *Star-Banner*. The *Times* was equipped with four linotypes, a Hoe rotary press which had seen service in the New York World, and a large staff. It was reported by grapevine that the paper represented a \$90,000 investment. It was thought the *Times* would soon put the *Star* out of business.

Unfortunately its owners didn't know anything about the newspaper business, and the advertising rates were so high Ocala merchants could not afford to use its columns. It folded up after four months of operation. It made one bad mistake, an attempt to get through Congress a bill to close the head of Silver Springs to navigation. Opposing that proposition was my first editorial fight. It was easily won as I had all of Ocala backing me.

In the latter part of September, 1925, Benjamin resigned as editor of the *Star* and went to West Palm Beach to join his friend Joe Earman until his paper, the *Weekly Independent*, suspended, and then returned to his first love, Marion County, to take over as editor of Mrs. Sprinkle's *Dunnellon News*. He resigned this position when he realized the paper could not make the grade.

Removing to Tampa he made his home with his son, L. E. Benjamin.

When "Uncle Ben" left the *Star*, much to my surprise - and consternation - "Port" Leavengood called me downstairs and told me that he wanted me to be the new editor. I took the job under protest, believing that I was wholly unqualified for it, and literally trembled in my boots. Not having confidence in myself, it was some months before I would consent to have my name appear at the top of the editorial page.

Little did we in the *Star* office realize when Leavengood brought his son, Hansel D. Leavengood into the office about 1917 as a printer, that he was training the future publisher of the *Star* and the *Star-Banner*. Port Leavengood died in 1929 and with his passing, casting another shadow over the *Star* family and the community, Hansel Leavengood assumed the duties of manager and publisher. How well he has succeeded in that capacity, I need only mention that he and his mother own the building in which the *Star-Banner* is housed, the building where the *All Florida Magazine* is published and other properties. Also, that as publisher of the *Star-Banner*, he is recognized as one of Florida's most successful publishers.

In March, 1943, John H. Perry, sensing that Ocala offered a good field for expansion of his newspaper chain, purchased the *Ocala Morning Banner*, and started modernizing it. Realizing that competing with Perry would be a foolhardy undertaking, Hansel Leavengood and his partner, Miss Adele Bittinger, sold the Evening *Star* to Perry in September of that year. The first issue of the *Ocala Star-Banner*, the name I had selected, appeared. Hansel Leavengood continued as publisher of the combined papers, and I as editor.

From that date to this, the *Star-Banner*, has grown and prospered. Perry completely re-equipped the mechanical plant, installing a 32 page Goss rotary press, numerous linotypes and other machinery. The paper carries the full Associated Press report, publishes five days in the afternoon and a Sunday edition, which frequently runs to 32 pages, the capacity of the press.

I believe I can say with a fair degree of modesty, that the *Star-Banner* under the Perry ownership and the management of my lifetime friend, Hansel Leavengood, together with the assist-

ance of a fine staff, is keeping abreast of the growth of Ocala and Marion County.

In December, 1957, when the editorial and news departments were removed to more commodious quarters on Washington Street, there was a reorganization of the staff. C. B. (Bernard) Watts, a graduate of the University of Florida where he studied journalism, was made city and telegraph editor. Watts, who joined the *Star-Banner* in 1949 as sports editor, had been serving as court and general news reporter. He is an all around newspaper man who can fill any assignment.

Victor P. Leavengood, son of the publisher, who became connected with the paper in June, 1952, as manager of the commercial department, was advanced to the post of assistant to the publisher and business manager. Victor is a graduate of the University of Florida and the Harvard School of Business Administration.

Other members of the staff are David Cook, court reporter and picture editor; Johnny Walker and Mrs. Frances Sheppard, news reporting and feature writing; Bill Bryant, sports editor; Mrs. Homer Klay and Rosa Nell Wilson, women's page editors.

The *Star-Banner*, under the Perry ownership, has kept pace with the growth of the community and county which it serves. When the *Star* and *Banner* were merged, the average size of the paper was 10 to 16 pages. Now the average page run is from 20-28 and 32 pages. The Sunday morning paper, which replaced the Saturday afternoon paper, taxes the capacity of the 32-page Rotary press, which is equipped to do color work.

The circulation has grown steadily and currently 8300 copies are printed. The paper is circulated in every part of the county by motor carrier route. There are some 55 people employed, not counting the 24 carriers, eight of them operating motor routes.

The *Marion County Sun*, a 11 by 17 page tabloid weekly which is devoted largely to pictures of Marion County people and scenes, was established in July 1949 by Clyde Hooker, editor and owner. Hooker came to Marion County to take a position as reporter on the *Star-Banner*.

Hooker recently sold his interest in the *Sun* to Charles E. Wise and William H. Dyer, who formerly owned and published papers in Ohio and Indiana. Wise is publisher and Dyer is editor of the *Sun*.

Another John Perry Publication, which is published in the *Star-Banner* building on Washington Street, was established in 1953. It has the largest state-wide circulation of any publication in Florida, with upwards of 400,000 copies being printed. The *All Florida Magazine* which is true to its name, is included as a supplement in 21 newspapers from Pensacola to Key West. It is distributed Sunday morning. Its circulation is so large that the big 32-page, four-color press is in constant operation throughout the week. Stuart L. Patton is publisher; Gene Gruber, editor; Lillie Mae Marshall, associate editor and Bea Bolton, art editor.

After reading over what I have written in the foregoing, I realize how inadequately I have portrayed the personalities of the men, and women who have made newspaper history in Ocala and Marion County, or how dedicated they were to their profession and their loyalty to the community and their fellow citizens.

Take Colonel Frank Harris as an example. Harris as I knew him in his late life, was a gentleman of the old school - kindly, courteous, mild mannered, quick to forgive and slow to offend. He was, in my mind, the Henry Watterson of Florida Journalism. His editorials were scholarly, prose poems in some instances, lengthy but never flamboyant.

Harris, whose immediate contemporaries were George Wilson, editor of the *Times-Union*, Wallace Stovall of the *Tribune*, Judge Benjamin Harrison of Palatka and Colonel D. B. McKay of the *Tampa Times*, took a prominent part in politics, and his writings were widely quoted throughout the state.

He filled some minor political offices, and served on many civic boards and committees, and was frequently mentioned in connection with the governorship. But for the fact that he feared to meet defeat in the political arena, he might have been elected governor of Florida.

Bittinger, Porter and Benjamin were of a different temperament, but all wielded an influence for good in the community. Bittinger was a great mixer, especially friendly to the country people. He made daily rounds of the business district, talking to as many country people as he could contact. Instead of writing weighty editorials, he filled his space with their comments on local and national affairs. He was a good platform speaker and always in demand at public gatherings, picnics and rallies.

Porter, well educated and well read, was essentially a preach-

er. Leaving the mechanical details of publishing the *Witness* in other hands, Benjamin's in particular, he traveled the state constantly, speaking to Baptist groups wherever he went, and building the influence and subscription list of the *Witness*.

When Benjamin became editor of the *Star*, he threw himself into the job of making the *Star* known throughout the state, and his fine editorial expressions sometimes sharply worded, and always to the point, were recognized as the work of a master craftsman. Almost totally deaf, he managed to keep contact with the public and abreast of what was going on throughout the country. He made friends wherever he went. He was a man with a great love for humanity, and his kindness toward others, friendship and sympathy in times of sorrow or distress, won him a host of friends.

Port Leavengood and "Bob" Carroll, much occupied with the business affairs of the *Banner* and *Star*, left the editorial work largely to their associates, but they, too, made their contribution to a community in which they were highly respected as business men of sterling worth and character. I worked with all of them, counted them as my friends and held them in the highest respect. I can truthfully say that Marion County was fortunate to have such men in charge of their newspapers, which as someone has said, are but mirrors of the communities they serve.

I have made no mention of the long succession of young women who served as society writers and reporters on the two papers, or some of the reporters who went on to higher rungs on the ladder of journalism. One, Edgar Easterly, who came to the *Evening Star* as a stripling reporter, became a topnotch Associated Press editor and only recently resigned as Associated Press bureau chief in Louisville to become executive secretary to Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler of Kentucky. Some of the young women who wrote society items for the *Star* and *Banner* today are the wives of prominent Ocala business and professional men.

And the carrier boys. Many of the business and professional men of Ocala today are the carrier boys of yesterday, either of the *Star* or the *Banner*. They are lawyers, doctors, merchants, school officials, bankers and corporation executives. Some former *Star* and *Banner* carrier boys have gone out into the world to make their mark in high places, in the professions and the business world.