

Meet the Unlikely Hero Saving California's Oldest Weekly Paper

High in the Sierra, Downieville, Calif., was about to become the latest American community to lose its newspaper. In stepped Carl Butz, a 71-year-old retiree.



Carl Butz, the new owner of The Mountain Messenger, in the paper's office in Downieville, Calif. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

By Tim Arango for *The New York Times*

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DOWNIEVILLE, Calif. — The night before his first deadline, Carl Butz, California's newest newspaper owner, was digging into a bowl of beef stew at the Two Rivers Café, the only restaurant open in town.

“Tomorrow I have to fill the paper,” he said with only mild anxiety. “The question is, will it be a four-page paper or a six-page paper?”

At 71, Mr. Butz is trim, with wire-rimmed glasses and a close-cropped silver beard, and he dresses in flannel shirts and cargo pants. Since his retirement and his wife's death in 2017, he considered traveling — to England or Latvia, or riding the Trans-Siberian Railway. But here he was, a freshly minted newspaper proprietor, having stepped in at the beginning of the year to save The Mountain Messenger, California's oldest weekly newspaper, from extinction.

The Messenger was founded in 1853. Its most famous scribe was Mark Twain, who once wrote a few stories — with a hangover, the legend goes — while hiding out here from the law.

Newspapers across America, especially in rural areas like here in Sierra County, have been dying at an alarming rate, and Downieville was about to become the latest “news desert.” The obituaries for the paper had already been written. Don Russell, the hard-drinking, chain-smoking editor with a blunt writing style who had owned and run the paper for nearly three decades, was retiring, and he seemed happy enough for the paper to die with his retirement.

And then one night Mr. Butz was watching “Citizen Kane” on cable and thought, *I can do that*. He made the deal quickly, paying a price in the “four figures,” he said, plus the assumption of some debts, without even looking at the books.

Still, Mr. Russell, an old friend of Mr. Butz's, was a reluctant seller. “His position was, it's a losing proposition and someone who'd want it would be crazy,” Mr. Butz said. “He called me a romantic idealist and a nut case. And that's not a paraphrase, but a direct quote.”

For the residents of Downieville — and there are not many; the population is about 300 — who for generations counted on The Messenger to arrive every Thursday, through wildfires and power outages and economic booms and busts, Mr. Butz has become an unlikely local hero, a savior of a cherished institution.

“Thank God for Carl, he stepped in,” said Liz Fisher, a former editor of the paper who lives across the street from its office and runs [The Sierra County Prospect](#), an online news site. “It was devastating for everybody that we were going to lose The Mountain Messenger.”

A cluttered, smoke-filled newsroom

On a recent Wednesday morning, facing his first deadline, Mr. Butz was staring down a blank computer screen in the newspaper's cramped two-room office above a beauty salon on Main Street. Mr. Butz, a fourth-generation Californian and a former computer programmer and labor economist for the state, readily admitted that he had no idea what he had gotten himself into, and it did not help to learn that the paper's publishing software was from the mid-1990s.

One of the first things he said he would do after buying the paper was ban smoking in the office, but next to his keyboard was a package of unfiltered cigarettes and an ashtray.

“What is the lead story?” Mr. Butz asked.

“The front page is blank,” replied Jill Tahija, the paper’s only other employee, sitting at an adjacent computer.

Ms. Tahija, who has worked at The Messenger for 11 years, might properly be called the managing editor, but on her business cards it says, “she who does the work.”

Her small black-and-white dog, Ladybug, a Boston terrier-Shih Tzu-Chihuahua mix, bounded around the cluttered newsroom. On every surface were books and trinkets and junk — Civil War histories, annals of the county, dictionaries, empty beer bottles, packages of ramen noodles.

In the archives section are old papers dating to the 1850s, and on the walls are pictures of Mark Twain and some slogans — old saws of newspapering, like “If it bleeds, it leads.”

Mr. Russell, who was on vacation, driving his R.V. up the coast with his wife, when Mr. Butz took over the paper, once [told The Los Angeles Times](#) that Twain had written a few unremarkable stories for The Messenger. Mr. Russell had read them on microfilm at a library. “They were awful,” he said. “They were just local stories, as I recall, written by a guy with a hangover.”

At his computer, Mr. Butz was putting together one of his first new features for the paper, a “poetry corner.” (He selected “[Thoughts](#),” by Myra Viola Wilds, an African-American poet from Kentucky who wrote in the early 20th century.) As Ms. Tahija worked on the front page — the next day it would be filled with stories about a local poetry competition, the upcoming census, wildfire prevention and a local supervisors meeting — Mr. Butz shifted his focus to finishing his letter to readers.

In it, he explained why he bought the paper. “Simply put,” he wrote, “the horrible thought of this venerable institution folding up and vanishing after 166 years of continuous operation was simply more than I could bear.”

The newspaper, he wrote, was “something we need in order to know ourselves.”

‘Like losing a friend’

Making a newspaper in Downieville is strictly an analog, ink-on-paper affair; there is no website, no social media accounts. It loses a few thousand dollars a year, and relies mostly on publishing legal notices from the county and other government offices, which brings in about \$50,000 a year, for the bulk of its revenue. It has about 700 subscribers and a print run of 2,400 copies, just below the county’s population.

“I’m not going to lose a million dollars but I know I’m going to have to subsidize some of it,” Mr. Butz said. “My daughter is already aware that her inheritance is shrinking.”



Downtown Downieville. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

Downieville is a remarkably well-preserved old Gold Rush town, perched at a fork in the Yuba River in remote western Sierra County. History is its pitch to tourists, and it has the feel of a backlot for an Old West movie — in its corner saloon, in the one-lane bridges over the Yuba, and in the second-story offices of *The Messenger*, next to the Fire Department. (A painted message on the door says it is the “oldest volunteer fire department west of the Mississippi.”)

With the demise of gold mining and the shuttering of the sawmills that were once an economic engine for the region, Downieville reinvented itself as a destination for mountain biking and fly fishing, with an abundance of Old West charm.

Residents reacted to Mr. Butz’s last-minute purchase of the paper with a mixture of relief and gratitude.

“A real sense of relief,” said Lee Adams, a former Sierra County sheriff and a current member of the county’s Board of Supervisors.

The paper was always an important institution, but it had become more so in recent years as Northern California dailies like *The Sacramento Bee* and *The San Francisco*

Chronicle stopped distributing in the region, and rarely sent reporters to cover Sierra County.

“We would have to fall off the face of the earth to make one of those papers on a normal news day,” Mr. Adams said.



An edition of the weekly paper was distributed in Sierra County, Calif., on a recent Thursday. Credit...Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

The Messenger is more than just a chronicle of weekly happenings — government meetings, births and deaths, the police blotter, the weather — but also a repository of the county’s history. The paper is just a year younger than Sierra County, which was founded in 1852, the year Wells Fargo was established to serve the Gold Rush and the riches being dredged from the river.

When Bill Copren, 76, a local historian and a former county assessor, wrote his master’s thesis on the political history of Sierra County in the mid-19th century, he relied on The Messenger’s archives.

More recently, when officials secured a spot on the National Register of Historic Places for a local school built in the Art Deco style in 1931, they used the paper’s archives to confirm the details of how it was built and who paid for it.

The paper’s closure, Mr. Copren said, would have been “like losing a friend.”

Under Mr. Russell, The Messenger had a distinctive attitude and a brusque, straightforward style. He was averse to political correctness and not immune from using curse words in print.

Mr. Butz said he did not plan to own the paper for long, and wanted to find a younger person who could take over. He said he was thinking about bringing the paper into the digital age, with a website, and was thinking about turning it into a nonprofit publication, accepting donations and grants to keep it running.

But on a recent Thursday morning, the day after deadline, he was just happy to have his first issue under his belt.

His Thursday routine is now established: He gets up early and drives about an hour and a half to a printing plant in Quincy, Calif., to pick up the bundles of freshly printed newspapers. On the way, he and Scott McDermid, the paper's longtime distribution manager, stop at the Express Coffee Shop for waffles and eggs.



Mr. Butz putting copies of The Messenger in a distribution box outside the Golden West Saloon in Loyaltan, Calif. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

And then, with a truck full of papers, they crisscross the county, past the tall cedars and Douglas firs of the mountains, and across the Sierra Valley, dotted with junipers and cottonwoods, stopping at every shop and gas station, emptying newspaper machines of last week's edition, collecting money and dropping off fresh bundles of The Messenger.

The story around town is how Mr. Butz saved the local newspaper.

But Mr. Butz, a still-grieving widower — his wife, Cecilia Kuhn, the drummer in an all-female punk band, Frightwig, died in 2017 — sees it another way.

“It’s saving me,” he said.



Publishing The Messenger is an analog, ink-on-paper affair. There are no social media accounts, though Mr. Butz said he was thinking about creating a website for the paper. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times