

CAL MATTERS

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Coronavirus pandemic claims a communal lifeline – 153-year-old Feather River Bulletin



By Jane Braxton Little, Special to CalMatters

QUINCY – Last Wednesday, for the first time in 153 years, the Feather River Bulletin did not fill mail boxes in rural post offices or at the ends of driveways dotted across these isolated mountain valleys.

In the newspaper's sprawling Quincy offices, where web presses should have been rattling the windows of a room as big as a basketball court, there was silence, the smell of fresh ink already going stale.

The [coronavirus crisis](#) has claimed Feather Publishing Company and its fleet of six community weeklies in Plumas and Lassen counties. One week it was reporting an update of the county General Plan and publishing full-page ads for online Easter services. The next week – gone. For a publication its readers loved to hate, the sudden loss is devastating. For

people who grew up reading the newspaper – grew up being in the newspaper – it's the passing of a communal lifeline.

Newspapers nationwide have been dying for more than a decade. More than [one in five](#) has shuttered in the last 15 years. Since coronavirus struck it's been a veritable slaughter: [22 newspapers](#) have stopped publishing since March 9. Make that 28. "Coronavirus hit us right between the eyes," said Mike Taborski, publisher, who joined the company in 1974.

The end came swiftly. The day Gov. Gavin Newsom issued his [shelter-in-place order](#) local businesses locked up: The wine bar and music venue owned by a husband and wife; the father and son antique and jewelry store; the family-owned fitness center; the \$1-a-bag thrift shop.

The collective bang of closing doors echoed up and down Main Streets throughout Plumas County in a show of obedience, astonishing for a strong Trump county that prides itself on obstinate independence. The loss of revenue from business advertising and events now cancelled – a children's production of "Peter Pan" and, likely, [High Sierra Music Festival](#) – was too much for the newspaper company already operating on a shoestring.

The demise of Feather Publishing's weeklies comes at a moment when the public was turning to it as the only source of local information on the coronavirus pandemic. People have always liked reading the weirdly funny sheriff's blotter, the outrageously partisan letters to the editor, and seeing their kids' pictures in the newspaper.

"It's about as hometown as you get," said Debra Moore, managing editor off and on since 1998. But when crisis hits, people turn to the reporting for news found nowhere else.

After health officials documented a local resident testing positive for COVID-19, then another and another, Moore began posting online updates in front of the paywall designed to increase print subscriptions. As with fires and floods, her posts became must reads, posted and reposted online and a conversational reference point as masked readers scurried from furtive darts into post offices, grocery and hardware stores.

Despite a past littered with typos and a dearth of investigative stories, people have come to trust these newspapers. They rely on them. The irony of collapsing in this moment of news necessity is not unique to Feather Publishing. But for the company that has spanned family histories from birth notices to wedding photos to obituaries, it is deeply personal.

"We're the last bastion of commonality that we have here," Moore said.

Taborski has considered [alternative funding models](#), which include [calls for Congress](#) to include community newspapers in the next stimulus package. For now he is holding the company dormant, waiting out the coronavirus crisis. Its more than 70 employees have joined the nation's [22 million unemployed](#). With no other newspaper and no countywide radio, the closure leaves Plumas with no government watchdog and no political reporting.

On April 8, just below the bold black headline blaring “the last edition,” Moore ran a photo of a rainbow painted with food coloring in a snow bank on the road to Bucks Lake. “We can only hope,” she said. So can we all.

Based in the northern Sierra Nevada, Jane Braxton Little is an independent journalist covering science and natural resource issues for publications that include Audubon, Discover, National Geographic and Scientific American, jblittle@dyerpress.com.