

Snow, Rapids, Starry Pine Nights, Gone Fishin'

Sandpoint Press beats the odds and rakes in more readers and clients with new-old entrepreneurial practices

by Paul K. Haeder

There's one cliché Keokee Press debunks – don't mix pleasure with business. Sandpoint and Priest River and rivers, trees, horse trails, the works, and you get to write about it, photograph it while living it.

Seems sort of a waste to not mix both.

Don't go into business with family is another cliché applied to small businesses, but newspaper and magazine publishing breaks that axiom. Books, color lifestyle magazines and running a full-service press was a pipedream of Chris Bessler, most notably known as the publisher of *Sandpoint Magazine* and Keokee Press.

As a former newspaperman who cut his teeth as a newspaper man after his glory days as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon and after living the rough and tumble outdoor life in Glide, Oregon, Chris has a nose for what's successful in the specialty magazine publishing world.

He read a lot in that rural setting of Glide. He's been at the helm of Keokee since 1990, but he took that affinity for reading everything to journalism school where he also majored in business. He wanted to be part of something big in the arena of community journalism.

Before that Keokee opened its offices, before *Sandpoint Magazine* came out with its first issue 21 years ago, before all those cool books Keokee has published, before the marketing and web design ancillaries burgeoned from Chris' love of rural communities and outdoor lifestyles, he worked the 80-hour-week reporting and editing gigs anchored at small town newspapers.

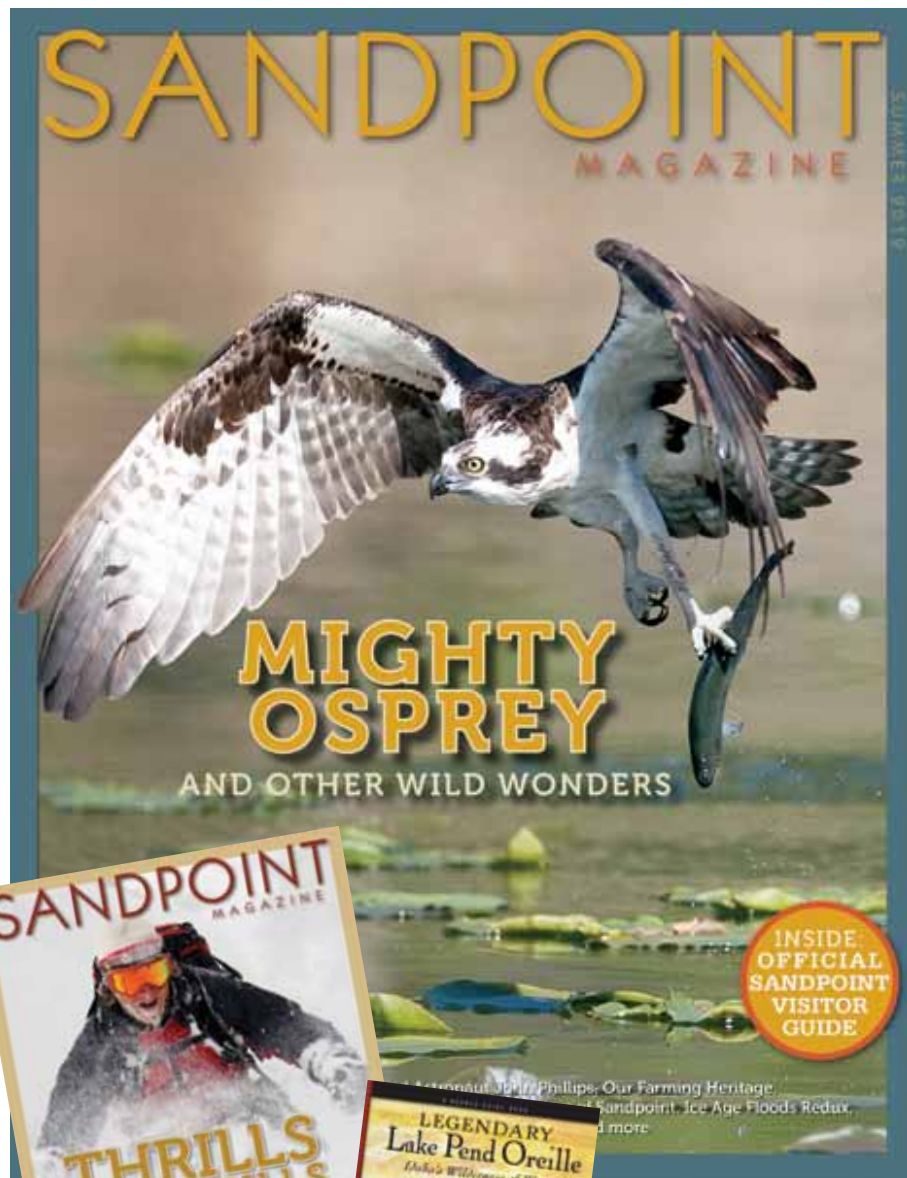
He recalls fondly his early days working for people like publisher Pete Thompson at the *Bonner's Ferry Herald*.

"Pete hardly asked me anything," Chris said. "He had hired another kid out of University of Montana, but he never showed up."

Chris asked a few U of O professors about Northern Idaho, since he had never been in this part of the proverbial woods. "They said it was beautiful but didn't know much about it otherwise. I was pretty determined to not live in a city . . . I liked outdoor things and living closer to nature."

That access to mountains, rivers and lakes was seeded as part of Bessler's DNA in Glide, a famous place for steelhead fishing. Luckily for Chris, he had a year in Hilo, at the University of Hawaii, which further solidified his life-long goal of being involved in writing, small business enterprise and community development, but only if all three could be had in the shadows of Douglas Fir and snow-capped peaks while herds of elk bugle and mew in between the screeches of brown tail hawks and whistles of osprey.

That was in 1979, and the freshly matriculated Chris



Above: Some of Keokee Press' publications. Right: Work and play are mixed together at Keokee Press.

ended up packing all he could and then pointing his motorcycle toward Sandpoint. He ended up getting to know all the ins and outs of the *Sandpoint Daily Bee* and *Shoshone News Press* and *Priest River Times*.

Someone like Dan Drewry showed him the ropes of how to put “community” into the superstructure of community journalism: “One of the premises of community journalism is to get as many names from the community into the newspaper. Pete was obsessed with that.”

This resonates with me—I too had to cover city council, the cop beat, planning and zoning as well as the rose club, the local clothing drive and any number of Rotary Club activities when I cut my teeth reporting in Southern Arizona and West Texas in the 1970s and early ‘80s.

Hard drinking, hard hiking and late nights covering city council before deadlines were part and parcel of Chris Bessler’s early days. He ended up doing typesetting, using manual typewriters, pasting up and laying out each issue of the newspaper, rushing to beat a 12:30 a.m. deadline. Then the newspaper folk would close down the Mint Club and Mister C’s.

This is a decade before Chris and his wife would have several journeys to Boundary County and then return to Sandpoint in 1990 and set up shop as magazine publisher. He covered the Reagan-Carter election, and an emblematic race: Steve Sims, Republican, taking on Democrat, Frank Church. Those were the days when Democrats were losing sway in state politics.

As newspaper editor, Chris had a chance to tackle a few opinion pieces, and one in particular resonates – Steve Sims gave some comments about Northern Idaho being a democratic territory taken over by a bunch of hippies and liberals.

Chris wrote an editorial that ended up on the AP wire – “smitten by the jaw bone of an ass,” was just one of the colorful phrases that got some Republicans fired up. Some cancelled subscriptions. “One person was castigating me as the editor, and said in a letter to the editor he stopped subscribing to the *Daily Bee* two months earlier . . . I put in an editor’s note: ‘Glad to see you are still reading the newspaper.’”

Things changed in 1985 when the Hagadone family purchased many of the newspapers Chris had worked hard at. “I felt the change and did not care for the corporate top down decision-making model. Losing local control created problems.”

So, before *Sandpoint Magazine*, before



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publishing *Fly Fisher* magazine (as part of the Federation of Fly Fishers) and *Schweitzer* magazine; before Keokee guidebooks; before his run for Sandpoint City Council; before ensconcing himself into Sandpoint and Northern Idaho life completely, Chris ended up in the Bay area: specifically, Santa Cruz, working for an alternative weekly, the same model that we see in Spokane at the *Pacific Northwest Weekly Inlander*.

It was another foundation-building time for Chris, working with Jay Shore and learning more of the ropes within the specialty magazine publishing game, from the *Good Times* and the twice-a-year *Cruzan' Magazine*. Chris calls it the model for his *Sandpoint Magazine*.

He had the sailboat on Monterey Bay, the beautiful beaches to jog on, and the wife he had met in 1983 while in Sandpoint. Also, the little bundle of a life-changer—a one-year-old child.

"We asked ourselves where we wanted to plant and dig in. San Francisco Bay was too big, too crowded. Glide, Oregon, was where the family home was. I was offered a job in Port Angeles. Bend was booming."

That was 1990, and he and his wife ended up picking Sandpoint. One caveat – not to work for a Hagadone-owned publication.

A Little Q & A Keeps the Misquoting Doctor Away

It's best to interject a little bit here of Bessler's verbatim responses, from a lengthy interview I developed for him. For me, we're also talking about my own passions – community journalism that is real and a meaningful bridge for community interests and needs; the great outdoors and the even greater rendering power of population and development growth over nature; and media conglomeration and control.

Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living (SCDAL): Philosophically, what does it mean to be publisher of Keokee "press"—books, *Sandpoint Magazine* and *Flyfisher*?

Chris Bessler (CB): Publishing is a business, so you better take care of the business end of making sure you have more revenues than expenses. Otherwise, you won't be around to do anything else. But publishing is also a somewhat special business that can make a difference in the course of human events, so it has a higher degree of responsibility to society than most businesses. My particular philosophy that I apply to the publications we publish is simply to approach our subjects from a



positive point of view. Including problems in our community, whether that community is one of place or interest.

SCDAL: If you could expand, given a better economy, luck, more money, what would you initially expand into?

CB: We're in midst of a sea change in the media with the Gutenberg era waning. The unique possibilities that the Internet creates are amazing (and mobile is about to change it up some more). I've had an idea for about 15 years that it would be fun to take the community portal concept behind SandpointOnline.com and make it better, and create a franchise for small towns around the nation (or world) to replicate. There are some poor attempts out there now. It would take a pile of investment to do it better.

SCDAL: One word to describe Sandpoint. In one sentence?

CB: How about "mellifluous." It's a nice confluence of natural environment, arts, recreation, community, pace of life.

SCDAL: Growth for some of us is not the ideal state for creating for economic, environmental, social justice. How has the growth imperative for Sandpoint helped and hurt people, planet, and prosperity?

CB: Yeah, I think population growth is a root problem for society and the planet. Historically humans have always been hard on the environment, but the planet was large enough that its natural systems could absorb the abuse without breaking down. I think we're past that now. The change/abuse seems endemic to all human cultures by the way. I'm reading *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* by Charles Mann right now, which documents that the native populations here were much larger

and more complex before Europeans arrived than is generally understood, as well as they had large-scale impacts already on the natural environment. Anyway, as pertains to Sandpoint: While it's certainly grown a lot, we've been fortunate that we've not so far really carried our share of the population growth here. Which means it has stayed relatively small and rural and nice. When I'm in the mountains at some nice place I like, I'm still often the only one there. I was on the Yaak River a half dozen times this season and my party saw other kayakers only once. That's perfect, as I don't like crowds. The recession right now is doing a favor in slowing down the growth, which helps us maintain a high quality of life. But of course, it is also depressing the local jobs, wages and standard of living for those who work in the local economy.

SCDAL: You ran for City Council. Why? What was your overall platform?

CB: After covering the council for a few years as reporter and editor, I was pretty well versed in issues and wanted to participate in the decision making. Politics is a competition sport too, which is fun for certain personality types. Alas, also I found if you want to be a politician you also need to be a campaigner, and that does not come naturally.

SCDAL: What's the biggest challenge for small presses, both books and periodicals?

CB: Cracking the major media/big company hold on distribution.

SCDAL: There are many crises in journalism and media and the Press -- what would you tell a young, aspiring journalism adherent and/or student?

CB: Your job prospects are going to be tough, so you better be driven by passion

for the journalistic endeavor and not by money. You're going to need multiple media skills, and better be able to look beyond the traditional forms to put yourself in the path of the emerging digital trends. That said, any time there is a change-up like this, there is also a ton of opportunities, if you can correctly identify what they are.

SCDAL: What would make Sandpoint a better community to live and work in?

CB: An economy that would support better jobs and wages. Of course, the flip side of that is: More and better jobs would attract more people to live here. As it is, those who decide to dig in and make a life here are willing to pay for the pleasure of living in a beautiful place and great small community by accepting the generally lower pay.

SCDAL: What sort of positive characteristics "brand" Sandpoint and the area in your mind?

CB: Natural beauty. Great outdoor recreation. Small, active community populated with a lot of interesting people and diversity of beliefs and passions.

Looking at the current issue of *Sandpoint Magazine*, one will be able to see the power of that cohesive vision Chris and his team of eight others practice and operate under – osprey on the cover, all centered around the project the magazine, the community and Avista undertook in placing a webcam on an osprey nest in Memorial Field.

"The magazine story, the web cam, there was a lot of community building that went into placing the cam and helping call attention to and appreciation of these amazing and ubiquitous raptors."

It's one of the more popular editions, dubbed the "wildlife issue" with stories on wildlife refuges in the area, photos of the "wild and wooly" close up of a treed cougar, and articles covering the osprey and the webcam. A rare animals section focuses on Canada lynx, grizzlies, wolves, caribou and owls.

Keokee Powder Clause

What's a good team without good team players, that's another motto the magazine uses as a rudder, and before I even had a chance to talk with Bessler, I was speaking with Billie Jean Gerke, another Sandpoint convert who grew up in Northern Idaho at a young age, but who ended up with a University of Wisconsin degree in journalism. Billie Jean is the editor of the magazine, and the go-to-editor of most all of the books Keokee publishes. Her own



commitment to Sandpoint is played out through lots of fund-raising and community building.

She worked for nine months for the Waseca school district in Wisconsin but she tired of the weather. That's when she decided to look west. "It dawned on me that I wanted to be in Sandpoint. I shifted my job search." She ended up working with the Chamber of Commerce and then with *Sandpoint Magazine*, both part-time and freelance gigs.

Now? The magazine publishes 30,000 summer and 25,000 winter issues. She has a stable of reliable crafty writers. She has a great art director. And advertising guys who beat the pavement and dial the phones.

She ended up part of the Sandpoint lifestyle species; aficionado of mountains, lakes, snow, rushing rivers and, for her, specifically, horseback riding and beer making.

The clause in her and others' work contracts is that when the powder is perfect, snowboarding and skiing take precedence over work when things aren't crazy. She's put down roots and footings on ten acres that has seen their value ratcheted up tenfold as the county's population has doubled, from 20,000 to 44,000 or 45,000.

Billie Jean guides the numerous books Keokee publishes – from part-time to full-time feature writer and now editor. She became issue editor beginning the summer of 2000.

We talked on the phone while she got going a batch of pale ale and oiled her horse saddle. She likes the model Chris Bessler has initiated, "we don't put all our publishing eggs in one basket." Keokee offers advertising and graphic design services, web design, proprietary book publishing, self-publishing and more.

Books—just listing a few, *East of Yellowstone: Geology of Clarks Fork Valley and the Nearby Beartooth and Absaroka Mountains* by Bob Carson; *Hiking Guide to Washington Geology* by Bob Carson and Scott Babcock; *Trails of the Wild Cabinets* by Dennis Nicholls with Jim Mellen; *The Land of Starry Night* by Robin Helm, illustrated by Gail Lyster; *Cowboy Boots and Other Stories* by John Sater; *On the Trail of the Ice Age Floods: The Northern Reaches* by Bruce Bjornstad and Eugene Kiver—are time consuming, but Billie emphasizes his boss and friend Bessler likes contributing to the book world.

The entire operation has nine full-time people, and the publication parties are famous, now and before their current 2006 downtown Church Street relocation: food, authors, Patron tequila, beer, wine and that Sandpoint smile.

What Billie and Chris emphasize is that Keokee may have diversified and come strong into the digital age, they do not allow wholesalers to come in and mess up the personal touch and competitive pricing. Auntie's Bookstore and 200 other retail accounts help Keokee gain this unique business relationship in the publishing world. They work with parks and ranger districts, as well as Bandford Books and Office Products in Sandpoint. Powells Books and Barnes and Noble carry their books, but never through a wholesale relationships.

When I asked him about Keokee being like a family, Bessler was clear on why he developed that ethos. "I've been able to hire people who are really talented but made a lifestyle decision to live here and forsake larger career opportunities they'd have in a city. So they stay a long time, and when problems come up we just have to figure them out. ■"