

Charles Denning Retiring

Herald – Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN
The Daily Newspaper of the Upper Cumberland
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Mary Jo Denton
Herald-Citizen Staff

Since the 1960's Denning has guided H-C coverage of the community with precision, creativity and integrity.



Denning honored by Council

Herald-Citizen editor Charles Denning, third from left, accepts a plaque from the Cookeville city council his 33 years as a reporter and editor of this newspaper. From left are Councilman Steve Qualls, Councilman Ricky Shelton, Denning, Mayor Charles Womack, Councilwoman Jean Davis, and Councilman Sam Sallee.

H-C Photo/Ty Kernea

Herald-Citizen editor Charles Denning, who has been at the editorial helm here for 35 years, will retire at the end of this month, he has announced.

He plans to travel, to write, and simply to rest. He will be missed by the staff here and by the community he has so long served.

Denning, who came to work here as a reporter back in the 1960's, was named editor in June of 1970. He has a longer tenure in that position than any of the six or seven other editors in the 102-year history of the paper.

Through the years, he has seen many changes in the region and in the newspaper, changes which came with the vigorous growth and development of this community and the rising public interest in matters of importance to the public.

As the small town grew into its own as the "hub" of the 14-county region, the newspaper expanded too, going from two days a week to five days, then six days a week, and, along with the rest of the world, entering the computer age.

Denning grew up on a farm in West Tennessee and took an early interest in reading of all kinds and especially in reading newspapers, a habit which turned into a profession.

He earned a degree at the University of Tennessee and later settled in Cookeville, where he pursued graduate studies in English for a time before going to work for the Herald-Citizen in the 1960's.

He liked the challenge and the creativity of newspaper work, and over the years, has taught many a reporter the basics of a good story, often beginning with the advice: "Don't be afraid to ask dumb questions."

He always stressed the importance of getting the facts, getting them as fast as possible, and presenting them in a clear format.

He guided the reporting of news here in a fearless way, never backing down from what he thought was right, even when someone who was powerful and persistent might disagree.

At the same time, he always applied common sense and compassion, never wanting to unnecessarily hurt or embarrass and always striving for what he thought was best for the community as a whole.

Herald-Citizen Publisher Bill Shuster said, "I've been associated with Charles for over 30 years here at the newspaper, and he's like family. We hate to see him leave, but we understand he needs time for family, travel, and other interests.

"I consider him a personal friend and wish him all the best. He will still be a part of the Herald-Citizen family, and I'm sure he'll be close by if we need him for advice and counsel."

Denning is highly regarded by his colleagues. Here are some of their comments:

* Reporter Lindsay McReynolds: "The power and importance of observation is probably the best asset I've gained from working with him -- he taught me that reporting isn't simply writing down what people say, but what they do and how they do it."

* Computer technician Don Foy: "Charles always made my work better, whether I was writing or designing a page or anything else."

* Newsroom secretary Ann Johnson: "I have worked with Charles off and on for almost 20 years. It has been a pleasure. I think the quality of the Herald-Citizen is due in large part to his knowledge of what a good newspaper contains."

* Newsroom secretary Michelle Haller: "Charles has been very easy to work with, and his sense of humor has made learning about the newspaper business enjoyable. He is very patient and helpful to new reporters and has been available at any time to assist in answering questions or presenting different views of the same situation. He is very approachable, which makes the work environment less stressful to the employees. His manner never made employees feel intimidated or hesitant in offering up opposing views or ideas of their own."

* Layout editor Bob McMillan: "Charles has led the newsroom through the decades with intelligence and sensitivity, and I'll not only miss him as a leader, I'll miss him as a long-time friend."

* Herald-Citizen Sports Editor Buddy Pearson: "Charles Denning has been super to work with. In the past five years, I have learned a lot from him on how to deal with people and certain situations as the sports editor. He has been there to offer advice when asked and has been a very positive influence for me and the sports staff. I am going to miss him a lot, and I wish him nothing but the best."

* Sports writer Chad Laytham: "The thing about Charles is that he has managed to stay relevant all the way through to the end of his tenure at the H-C. Sometimes, when you think of someone nearing retirement age, they're often thought of as 'washed up.' No one who knows Charles today has any thoughts about him being 'washed up.'"

* Lifestyles editor Anne Cathey: "Charles is the first editor I have ever worked for. Although I have only been at the paper a short time, he has set a clear example for me to continue learning from."

* School page editor Bobbie Bruton: "As a journalist who has probably seen and heard it all, Charles still has the capacity to see and appreciate the significance of the simple joys of life."

* Photographer Camille Fliss: "I could not think of an individual better equipped to teach me perspective. Charles has such a healthy, youthful curiosity. You can see it twinkle in his eyes. He is an awesome listener. He is what we all aspire to be: healthy, happy, and knowledgeable. I hope we all can retire with such vivacity."

* Advertising manager Albert Thompson: "As editor, Charles read and scrutinized far more news than most people do, but somehow he was able to keep a clear focus and an uncluttered view of what was most important. This ability has kept him optimistic in a world of pessimistic, 'bad' news. I believe this is one of the many reasons he excelled in his profession."

* Composing room employee Phillip Swann: "When I came to work here in 1977, Charles was here. A lot has changed since then, including the color of his hair, and mine too. So it seems to me that he has been here forever and should continue to be here forever."

"It has been a pleasure knowing Charles and working with him. He is a people person and knows how to talk with people of various beliefs and backgrounds. He will be missed by all. I wish him a very pleasant and enjoyable retirement and hope that he will drop by often to visit with all of us."

* Composing room employee Helen Wheeler: "I have enjoyed working with Charles for the past 33 years. He was someone I could always go to if I wanted to know the correct spelling of a word or name. If he didn't know at least he knew enough letters to look it up in the dictionary."

"It's not often that we are privileged to know someone in the work place over half our lifetime. It doesn't get much better than working with people you can count on as friends who will be there for you no matter what."

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News Department Profiles

Charles Denning is the executive editor of the Herald-Citizen. His job is to oversee all the news gathering, story writing, and publishing of the news each day.

He had worked here for a total of 36 years, beginning in 1965 and working a three-year stint, then attending graduate school at Tennessee Tech for a time, and then returning to this job in June of 1970.

Like most everyone who works here, he enjoys the variety of the tasks that fill each day.

"If you stopped in my doorway, you might find me writing the text (called 'cutlines') that goes under a picture, or 'sizing' a picture (determining mathematically the size it will be when it comes out in the paper), or proof-reading and editing stories or other materials that are about to be published.

"Or I might be talking on the phone to people who would like to write a column for the paper or would like to sell us editorial cartoons.

"Or I might be talking to someone who is ticked off about something we have done or have not done in the paper. I might be going through my daily mail or cleaning off my desk or the stacks of assorted papers and photos on the floor, which is an extension of my desk."

But those tasks are not the ones he enjoys the most, he said.

"What keeps me going, my deepest satisfaction, comes from the process of asking questions and collecting information and, with total focus and attention, framing it into a story, word by word, sentence by sentence, inside my mind and then on the screen of my computer.

“I can get a real ‘non-chemical’ high out of that. If someone reads it and tells me it was ‘a good story,’ I like that. But if no one does, that’s okay too. That one is behind me, and I’m on my way to the next.”

He also likes working with the reporters and photographers to find and develop ideas for stories and pictures, something that is done daily.

“To turn an idea over and over, to consider it, feed it, watch it evolve into a finished work on the printed page. This is, I think, one of the two most important things I do as an editor – listening, asking questions, encouraging people. Working as a news writer is always tough, always stressful, and the people who do it need all the support they can get.”

He likes to allow the staff the freedom to think and create on their own, with the understanding that they may come to him for guidance when needed.

“I’m not needed for all routine stuff,” he said. “We are well organized. Our people are intelligent and know their jobs. If they need my help, it’s mainly when an unusual problem comes up, when there are those ‘What do you think we should do about this?’ questions.”

He was born in Troy, TN, which is in Obion County. His parents, the late Owen and Ople Denning, were farmers. His brother, Herman Denning, still farms near Obion. His sister, Naomi Gothard, lives in Madison, TN and works for the Nashville Chamber of Commerce.

He graduated from Troy High School and later attended the University of Tennessee at Martin and then graduated from UT Knoxville.

For a time after that, he worked for the Knoxville News-Sentinel. He served in the U.S. Air Force for four years and then worked for the Alaska State Employment Service in Anchorage for a time.

He and his former wife, Jeanette Keith, have a son, Ryan Denning, who lives and works in New York City. Ryan is a producer for a company which creates Internet web sites for corporations.

Charles is currently dating Martha Highers, formerly of Baxter, who is working on a PhD at the University of Louisiana.

His hobbies include walking and taking long hikes “out among the natural world” and going to “really original, out-of-the-ordinary movies, he said.

He also likes reading “any thought-stirring, change-my-life stuff,” trying to make “astonishing” photographs, tending to his dog, Solo, and “talking to interesting people.”

He can and does talk to the dog, he said.

“But the dog speaks only in short, cryptic gestures, and I understand almost nothing he says – my stupidity, I’m sure.

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‘I always wanted to write for a newspaper’ An Editor’s Farewell
By Charles Denning, Herald Citizen Staff

For almost as long as I can remember, I wanted to write for newspapers.

That disease began in junior high when a friend and I tried putting out a newspaper in a school that had none at all, a tiny rural school among the corn and soybean fields of far Northwest Tennessee. I’d got hooked on columnists like Ernie Pyle, Billy Rose, Robert Ruark – popular in the mid- and late 1940’s and early 50’s but unknown and unread today.

They were different – different I mean, from columnists writing today when ‘columnist’ typically means ‘political pundit.’ Opinion pages now are saturated with politics and public affairs, but those guys 60 years ago seldom, if ever, touched politics as we think of ‘politics.’

They wrote to entertain; they wrote in an age when readers had time to read for fun and pleasure. Ernie Pyle had become famous as a battlefield correspondent during World War II but he also wrote about small-town and rural Indian where he was from; Billy Rose’s short columns were ‘surprise ending’ pieces in the style of de Maupassant or O. Henry; and Robert Ruark was Hemminwayesque, writing about adventures he found while traveling the world.

People, not Politics:

What sets apart from today’s solemn specialist in opinion-making is that all of them wrote primarily about people. They told stories about good things and bad things in people’s lives, happiness and disappointment, heartbreak and courage, fools and felons, comedy and tragedy. They wrote what I wanted to read; they wrote the way I, a sunburned farm kid, wanted to write.

I didn’t like farming. Small and runty and physically lazy (I tried but can’t think of a word to make me look better), I just wasn’t cut out for it. One of my teachers knew that – well, you know, the fact is, my mama and daddy and everybody knew it.

Our school library was pitifully stocked, but Frances McNeill, and English teacher, belong to a book club – The Literary Guild, I think – and had a library at home. She would bring books for me to read that would have never been found in the Troy High

School library. She wasn't sure she should do that, but she did. These were, after all, *best sellers*, some of them. Books shipped in along way from Troy, Tennessee. Who knew what ideas a mentally hungry kid might dig out of them? Like finding Kryptonite from an alien planet.

Wes Swietek named new H-C managing editor
Herald – Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN
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30 April 2005

Wes Swietek has been named the Herald-Citizen's managing editor to replace the retired Charles Denning. The announcement was made by Herald-Citizen Publisher Bill Shuster.

Swietek, a Chicago native, was the managing editor of The Walton Tribune in Monroe, Ga. for the last 11 years. During his tenure at the Tribune, the paper earned that state's highest newspaper honor -- General Excellence designation from the Georgia Press Association -- for the last seven consecutive years. The paper also was cited in a national evaluation by the American Press Institute as a "model" for other newspapers.

"Filling Charles' shoes will be a major task, but I'm thrilled to be working with a dedicated group of professionals," Swietek said. "My goal will be to continue to provide the Upper Cumberland with a high-quality newspaper that will grow and progress along with the community."

Swietek also previously worked as the editor of The Hampshire Register News and in the sports department of the Rockford Register Star, both in Illinois.

He assumed his duties at the Herald-Citizen April 25.

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