

## Accidental journalists

By Jane Hampden

*What happens when a bunch of outsiders with no journalism experience buy an island newspaper?*

"Land ho!" shouts a redheaded boy, finger pointing over the guardrail of the ferryboat's upper deck. His mother holds onto him with a handful of T-shirt as the 90-ton ferry churns toward the dock at Detroit Harbor. The family will spend a typical June day on Washington Island: skipping stones, eating cheese curds, and passing by the wooden storefront on Main Road with the hand-painted *Washington Island Observer* sign.

A few miles east of the ferry dock, the *Observer's* editorial board gathers in the chairwoman's family room. Tall picture windows overlook a rugged Lake Michigan shore. With coffee and lemon scones on the kitchen counter, it feels like a chatty book club until the group launches into earnest debate on a range of touchy questions: Should the paper report on an islander charged with sexual assault? Review local plays when cast members are neighbors? Respond to impassioned bird watchers who insist that "robin" and "cardinal" are proper nouns, AP style be damned?

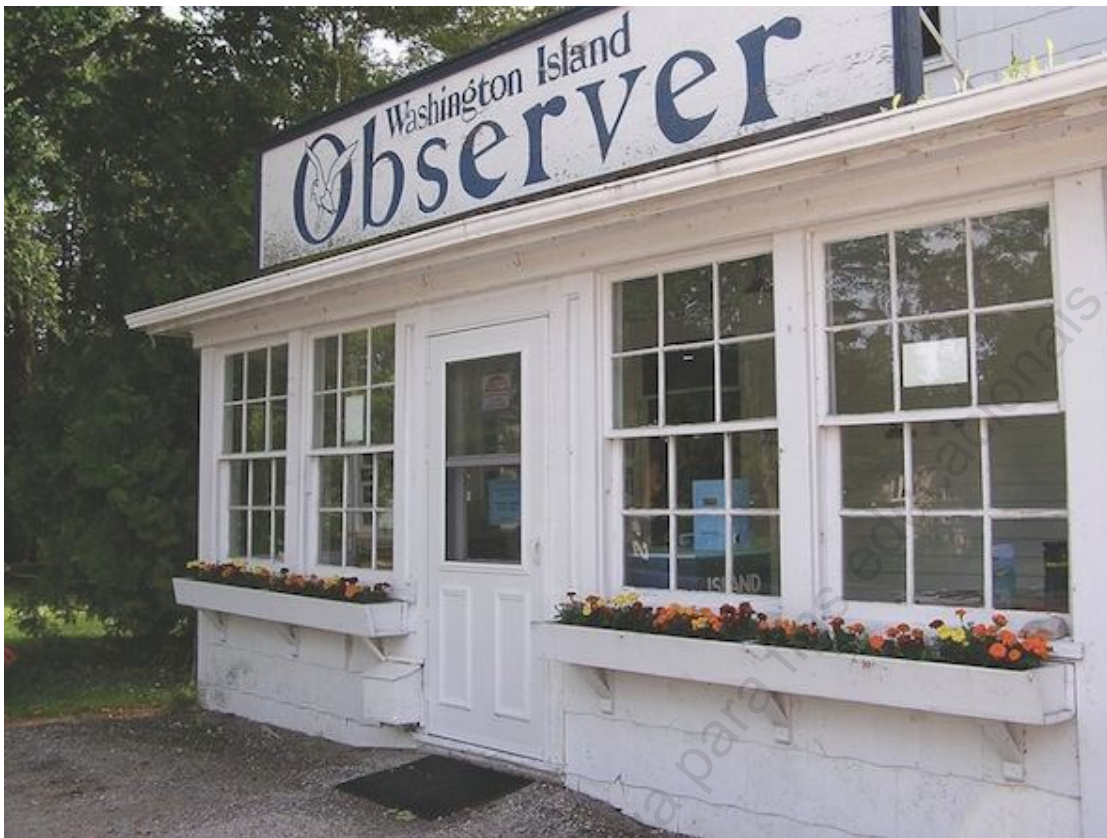
The board members' résumés are diverse and include the owner of the ferry line, a French teacher from Princeton, NJ, and a retired nasa engineer. But everyone in the room has one thing in common: no journalism experience. Most have summer homes on the island. They agree the weekly paper is an essential, if tattered, piece of the local fabric. "We have a strong belief that community newspapers are still a very good way to disseminate the news," says Marsha Williams, the *Observer's* treasurer, who has held top financial posts at Orbitz and Crate & Barrel in Chicago.

The 27 families that pitched in nearly \$60,000 to buy the *Observer* (and cover three part-time staffers and first-year expenses), are getting a crash-course in journalism; and not just any journalism—small-town journalism, which, as the new owners are learning, can be a funny and frustrating thing. They had clear goals when they closed the deal 18 months ago: preserve the newspaper's homespun vibe, but also report on threats to the island's fragile economy, its overburdened town government, and its shrinking school; with 60 students K-12, Washington Island is Wisconsin's smallest school district.

The experiment's catalyst is 73-year-old Lucia Petrie. Casually stylish and politely blunt, Petrie is known for raising big money. She helped lead a \$100-million campaign for the soaring Milwaukee Art Museum addition, designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. The museum is now a progressive symbol of possibility in a city working to shed its rust-belt image.

Petrie and her husband, Pete, a retired management consultant, first visited Washington Island 42 years ago, tent camping on a rainy night. Decades later their bright, modern home on Hemlock Drive is a family hub. Over dinner and wine two summers ago, the Petries and a few friends ruminated on the fate of the *Observer*, which had declined in quality and was up for sale. The owners, Gail and Robert Toerpe, lived several hours away in Milwaukee; instead of tackling local issues, they published musings on their grandchildren's island visits. *The Observer* had languished on the market for three years. "The conversation moved quickly to what a shame it would be to see that paper go," recalls Petrie, "and if we bought it, what we would do to make it better."

Today, Petrie is president of Washington Island Community News LLC, and its door-to-door ad saleswoman. Pete oversees the business side. They did not need years of journalism experience to understand the challenges: boost circulation, attract new advertisers, and earn the trust of 700 year-round residents who brave the frozen quiet in winter—the "real islanders" who often roll their eyes at big-city ideas.



**Tornado watch** *The Observer's new owners try to balance 'real journalism' with the reality of life in a small town.*  
(Jane Hampden)

Washington Island is far from city life in both miles and mindset—"above the tension line," as boosters like to say. On a map of the Midwest, it is a 35-square-mile dot in the expanse of the Great Lakes. The drive to the tip of Door County leads travelers through a hilly peninsula of cherry tree orchards and idyllic harbor towns overlooking Lake Michigan to the east, and the Bay of Green Bay to the west. At the tip, choppy waters converge in a dicey passage called Death's Door for its toll on the wooden ships of yesteryear. The ticket booth for the Washington Island Ferry Line is five-and-a-half hours north of Chicago, but in high season vehicles with New York and California license plates line up to board, joining bicyclists and wanderers for the half-hour boat ride. The island population swells to nearly 3,000 in summer.

Visitors are charmed by the simplicity of the place: rustic resorts, evening fish boils, and The Albatross Drive-In. There are no fast-food chains, no water slides, and no gaudy T-shirt shops. Cellphone and Internet service are spotty. The island was home to Potawatomi Indians until Scandinavian fishermen and farmers arrived in the mid-1800s.

All summer long the cheery red Cherry Train transports tourists to pristine School House Beach, a quarter moon of white limestone with sweeping views of Washington Harbor. Just a stone's throw from the beach, the Washington Island Town Cemetery is a catalogue of island settlers: Hansen, Ellefson, Jorgenson, Andersen. The names on the gravestones are the same ones printed in the *Observer's* articles, photo captions, and advertisements: Hansen's BP Amoco; Ellefson's Dock; Jorgenson & Son Excavating; Andersen Construction. These third- and fourth-generation islanders shop, volunteer, and ride the ferry with the second-home crowd that fuels the island economy. "It doesn't matter who you are," says Lorel Gordon, 62, an island native who founded the original newspaper in 1981. "You can be the top exec of a huge company; you can be a janitor. You don't have a façade here."

Gordon launched the paper as an advertising vehicle for local businesses. She wrote articles about island characters and happenings, and the paper grew into a respected news source. "People really just wanted a connection," Gordon says. "They felt they were getting something of what was going on, and they wanted more."

Meeting constant deadlines was a lot of work, though, and Gordon sold the newspaper in 1992 to the Toerpes, who owned it for the next 20 years. Gail Toerpe describes her version of the *Observer* as “cozy,” but readers chuckled at articles about the family dog and political rants from a grumpy island columnist. “If you didn’t like it,” says Toerpe, “you didn’t have to read it.”

The news void that developed during the *Observer*’s “cozy” years was often filled by famously virile island rumors: who got mad at the town board meeting; whose daughter got engaged over the weekend; and on and on. “A fart on one side becomes a tornado by the time it gets to the other side of the island,” says 36-year-old Town Chairman Joel Gunnlaugsson. The fourth-generation islander is a ferryboat captain with a diamond stud earring and Icelandic blue eyes that are as common as wildflowers on Washington Island.

Splendid isolation means the town provides services usually handled by a city or county: police, fire, road maintenance, garbage, utilities. So the “tornadoes” become Gunnlaugsson’s problem. “When all hell breaks loose, unfortunately, everybody calls me,” he says.



**On-the-job training** Mary Marik, left, gathers news and gossip on the porch of the Red Cup Coffee House. Marik, who served as the first managing editor under the *Observer*’s new owners, left her Parks Commission seat when it conflicted with her reporting. (Jane Hampden)

The civic storms are intriguing to Mary Marik, 68, who signed on as the *Observer*’s first managing editor under the new owners. She served on the island’s Parks Committee and, before retiring, worked as a copy editor at a think tank in Washington, DC. With her spiky silver hair and signature gray glasses, Marik quickly became the face of the paper around town. She had never written for newspapers but loved reading them, and had edited several journalism textbooks. She was fascinated with the principles of newsgathering. “There’s a difference between reading about it and doing it,” Marik says. “But the care and feeding of authors is a lot like keeping in touch with sources up here—talking to people, calling people.”

Marik’s approach to her new job was shaped by one of the first people to embrace the idea of buying the *Observer*. Rich Shereikis, a professor emeritus of English literature at the University

of Illinois-Springfield, had written feature stories and movie reviews and contributed to national magazines (including the *Columbia Journalism Review*). He and his wife, Judy, purchased their cottage on Washington Island in 1996. Among the new owners, Shereikis became the “journalism with a capital J” guy, and chairman of the editorial committee. “Rich was insistent that we cover town issues so readers could understand what was happening, even if the news might upset people,” Marik recalls. “He said ‘news is news,’ even if it wasn’t comfortable.”

I talked with Shereikis in the summer of 2012 on his breezy screened porch. He had been a newspaper owner for all of six months and was wrestling with the question of how to sensitively cover vexing issues such as the shrinking school population. “I feel torn, as someone who admires real journalism,” he said. “I feel like we should be doing it, but at the same time, it’s different in a small town.”

The new group’s journalism philosophy was shaped by metropolitan dailies in Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York, and by stories on npr. By contrast, the closest media market to Washington Island is Green Bay, and even that small city is a ferry ride and long drive away. Islanders are unaccustomed to blunt, hard-news coverage—the kind that could create lifelong grudges. Dick Purinton, who owns the ferry line and donated money for the *Observer* purchase, favors a judicious approach. His support of the venture is reassuring to many islanders—they trust Purinton, so they trust the newspaper owners. “You want to be fair and objective, and yet you can’t step on toes continually,” he says. “That’s not going to work and it doesn’t serve a long-term purpose.”

So far, *Observer* articles have reflected this cautious sensibility. Marik opted for a just-the-facts approach to town business, reporting on agenda items, discussions, and votes. But she also tackled some important stories that were unlikely to offend, such as a comparison of island hotel rates, the record-low Great Lakes water levels, and the US Department of Agriculture’s decision to kill invasive, non-native swans on the island.

The owners recruited dozens of volunteers to write about the Washington Island Music Festival, the Death’s Door Barbecue, and the Lion’s Club Ice Fishing Derby. Pictures of islanders posing with 20-pound salmon are still standard fare in the *Observer*, but the owners have tried to ratchet up the journalistic scrutiny on some difficult issues, such as the plight of the Washington Island School. With 10 graduates, the class of 2013 was unusually large; there are four seniors in the class of 2014. As young families leave the island for schools with more academic and extracurricular programs, the district loses funding and becomes a bit more vulnerable.

Rich Shereikis was determined to have the *Observer* cover curricula and funding issues. He wrote about the debate over multi-grade classrooms and the implementation of Common Core State Standards, a controversial effort to standardize the core educational curriculum in every state. The paper ran interviews with school-board candidates, and published a school report card based on statistics from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. “The public needs to be made more aware because the school tries to pass bond issues every year,” Shereikis said. “With little information, it’s hard for the school to make a case for more funding.”

School Superintendent Tim Raymond thinks the *Observer* coverage helped voters understand what was at stake in an April referendum on school funding that passed by a vote of 214-193. If the measure had failed, the district would have lost a third of its estimated \$1.2 million annual budget. “To have that information disseminated in an open, unbiased format is really important,” Raymond says. “They don’t make something into a flower basket that isn’t, nor are they on a witch hunt.”

Readers are responding. Three hundred year-round islanders and 800 off-islanders now subscribe, a 25-percent increase in circulation since the paper changed hands in early 2012. The new owners raised the price of a single copy for the first time in 20 years, from \$1 to \$2, and say they heard few gripes. The *Observer* grew to a record 28 pages last summer. “People

used to complain that there was nothing in the *Observer*," says Orion Mann, whose family opened Mann's Store, the only grocery on the island, in 1903. "I think that's changed."

Another Mann brother has a less sanguine appraisal of the weekly and its owners, and his plaint underscores the nature of the challenge for the *Observer*. Keith Mann, who runs Mann's Mercantile, says the newspaper should highlight the volatility of the seasonal economy and its effect on island businesses, many of which are for sale. He cites inherent conflict between the interests of local businesspeople and part-time residents from far-away cities. "They have expectations of having more things here like they had back home," says Mann. "They're not really satisfied with our little town as is."

The conflict is about more than seasonal demand for goat cheese and copies of *The New York Times*. Summer residents, including the new *Observer* owners, tend to support economic development initiatives that could attract more tourists to the island but also require substantial investment. A development plan for Detroit Harbor, the aging gateway to Washington Island, is a case in point. In addition to dock upgrades, a consultant's master plan calls for an inviting visitors center and marina, canoe and kayak launches, and multi-use trails linking the harbor to Main Road businesses.

In June, Marik covered a tense town meeting about the proposed improvements that drew more than 40 people, including some who derided what they view as an exorbitant price tag—upwards of \$9 million. Others argued that the enhancements would draw more tourists and jobs to Washington Island. "A lot of people who have grown up here want to keep the island as it always has been," says Rich Walker, a retired Chicago banker and *Observer* investor. "I think change is inevitable no matter what community you live in, and change ought to be managed."

The next step in the Detroit Harbor plan is for the town to seek state and federal funding. Marik intends to keep covering the story, and she resigned from the Parks Committee, which required her to voice an opinion on the harbor plan. After settling into the role of reporter, she no longer was comfortable working for the government. "I feel more free to cover stories on the island," Marik says.

The families that bought the paper do not expect a return on their investment; they agreed to donate all profits to island community groups. After losing money in its first year, the paper is on track to be self-sustaining, according to Lucia and Pete Petrie, who are pleased with the evolution of their dinner-table idea. "It's changed the way islanders look at us," Lucia says. "There's a suspicion that off-island people are too big for their britches, but we've had a very warm response."

A new question on the owners' agenda is whether to publish editorials about delicate but pressing island issues. The fear, obviously, is that opinion pieces could stir up new pots of trouble. The editorial board has had to wrestle with the decision without its thoughtful chairman. Rich Shereikis was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a year ago and died five months later at 75. His wife, Judy, wrote an obituary for the May 9 edition of the *Observer*, highlighting the great pleasure he drew from the newspaper project, and his love of Washington Island. "Rich had, in his years on the island, biked every road many times over," she wrote. "And during these past difficult months he often said that he found solace in retracing his rides on these beautiful roads in his mind's eye."

When Shereikis biked to School House Beach, he passed the town cemetery, with its hodgepodge of tributes surrounding the graves of beloved islanders. Birdhouses and lighthouses decorate headstones engraved with fishing poles and vintage cars. Clusters of daisies and daylilies crowd the headstones.

Island native Sherry Young visits the cemetery often to tend her family's graves. She worked with Lorel Gordon on the original *Observer* in the 1980s, when they ran off copies in the office of the Bethel Church.

Watering a pot of marigolds, Young reflects on the new *Observer*. She says the stories are important again because of the new owners. "It took us awhile to get used to them," she admits. "Most of the people are well educated. They perhaps have a different lifestyle from what I do. But they care about the island. I think they really do."

**Fonte: Columbia Journalism Review, New York, p. 34-41, Sep/ Oct. 2013.**

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