

INNOVATION

This Small-Town Newspaper Is the Last of Its Kind

The “Saguache Crescent,” a weekly in a Colorado hamlet, still prints on the 19th-century technology known as linotype

By Nick Yetto

Photographs by Rob Hammer

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The *Saguache Crescent's* masthead is cast from lead in a process that allows it to survive a year of printing. Rob Hammer

A mechanical ruckus. Oiled metal clattering hard and loose. A room astounding in its clutter, alive with spinning gears, reciprocating arms, rattling chains. A single man at the controls, coaxing the steampunk contraption along. It's publishing as an athletic act, all the more impressive for its medieval roots.



Coombs and his office at the *Crescent*. “I’m also the janitor,” he says. “And if I’m the janitor, I ought to get fired.” Rob Hammer

“It’s just what I know, so there’s no point in changing,” says Dean Coombs, the man running the machine. Coombs, 70, is publisher and editor of the *Saguache Crescent*, the weekly for Saguache, Colorado, a hamlet of around 500 souls high in the Rocky Mountains. The *Crescent* goes to press every Tuesday. It costs 35 cents at the local gas station and town thrift store, and you can snag a copy for free at the 4th Street Diner and Bakery. An annual subscription can go for as little as \$16. There are 360 subscribers. Each week, Coombs produces 400 or more copies using a Mergenthaler Model 14, which his family purchased new in 1920. It’s the last linotype-produced newspaper in the United States—and perhaps the world.

separate station, clamped in a frame, and put through a roller to create the one-page press plate used for printing. Mergenthaler's invention ushered in the modern print age. Thomas Edison called it "the eighth Wonder of the World," and Mergenthaler became known as a second Gutenberg. By the 1970s, though, the machine was obsolete, replaced by the great eradicator of skilled labor—the computer.



Reading words that are upside down and backward, Coombs arranges lead slugs in columns within a frame, which is clamped tight to justify the text. Rob Hammer

The *Crescent*, launched in 1882 as the *Saguache Advance*, has been produced in the same building since 1902. Coombs' maternal grandparents purchased the newspaper in 1917, and it has remained in the family for three generations. His mother, Marie, worked at the paper as a little girl and continued until she was about 80, setting type and writing feature stories. His father, Ivan, ran print operations. When Dean was a

baby, his parents hooked his carriage to the back of the press to rock him to sleep. He started working at the paper at age 12.



Local journalism is a matter of manual labor for Coombs, who must often improvise repairs to the *Crescent's* century-old linotype machine. Rob Hammer

Coombs' father labored hard each week on the *Crescent* but also made money working jobs throughout the region, from farming to carpentry, and in 1968 Ivan and Marie considered selling the newspaper. A local family was interested in buying, and Coombs' parents indulged fantasies of leisure time and travel. "I was pretty upset about that," recalls Dean. "As should be obvious, I'm not one of those people who like change."

Beyond that, Coombs feels a commitment to his neighbors—the community that has depended on the *Crescent* to bring them the news of the day: "Regina Swartz Declares for Treasurer," "Clips From the Clerk," "Study Club Meets."



Coombs taps a lead slug in place. Rob Hammer

“A newspaper is not an easy thing to get out of,” Coombs says. “I have one guy who prepaid his subscription for seven years. What would I do? Call him and give him his money back?”

If something breaks, Coombs fixes it. “No one’s ever worked on a 100-year-old linotype. It’s uncharted ground. There are little things—I don’t even know what they do! I just know that they can’t be loose.”



Coombs at work on the *Crescent*, which is still being made on a linotype machine. Rob Hammer

Bill Hazard, 65, is a lifelong Saguache resident, a retired schoolteacher, unofficial local historian and custodian of the town graveyard. “I just marvel at how well he keeps that thing running,” Hazard says.

While newspapers run on deadlines, finicky old contraptions keep their own schedules. An untimely malfunction can have Coombs up all night, scrambling for a fix. In such moments, his patience can meet its limit. “You can’t have a sledgehammer around the thing,” he admits—he’d be tempted to use it in moments of frustration.



The command station for the Coombs family's 1920 Mergenthaler Model 14. To create the letters on each press plate, Coombs uses the keyboard in the center. Rob Hammer

Coombs has been running the paper ever since his father died of a heart attack in 1978. The family produced that week's paper the following day. In the four decades since, Coombs has missed only one day of work—because of food poisoning. He has no children and isn't training a replacement. When he retires or dies, the *Crescent*, and the art of linotype, will go with him.

"To hand the paper off, I'd have to say, 'You'll never go anywhere. There will be no vacations.' That's not the way people want to live." Coombs gives a good-humored sigh, edged with exhaustion. "Apparently, it doesn't bother me."



Dean Coombs examines a copy of the *Saguache Crescent* fresh off the press. Rob Hammer

Coombs notes at least one person who could step into the shop and take over the machine without any training. Unfortunately, that person is Johannes Gutenberg.

“Everything that Gutenberg did—how he would have handled his type—he could walk into the *Crescent* and know what was going on.” A hearty laugh punctuates his sentence. “If he wasn’t, you know, startled to death about being alive 500 years later.”

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