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## The Carroll County Mirror-Democrat and Savanna Times-Journal are Alive and Well

With a loss of nearly a third of all newspapers in the United States over the last two decades, two Carroll County newspapers have successfully withstood the brutal sands of journalistic times and continue to be a unique staple to the communities they serve.

“Newspapers throughout the United States are facing very challenging times

as social media has upended the traditional business plan,” said Robert (Bob) Watson of Mount Carroll, Illinois, owner and publisher of the *Carroll County Mirror-Democrat* and *Savanna Times Journal*.

“The *Mirror-Democrat* and *Times Journal* are the lone remaining newspapers in Carroll County, after two others ceased publication within the past two years,” Bob said. “I would suggest that makes the *Mirror-Democrat* and *Times Journal* unique, as well as a continuing success.”

The *Carroll County Mirror* started in 1860 and eventually merged with the *Democrat* in October 1919, becoming the *Mirror-Democrat*. *Savanna* started their newspaper, *The Register*, in 1854. *The Register* was bought and renamed the *Savanna Times Journal* in 1875. Both newspapers at that time were dailies.

Fast forward in time and numerous newspapermen and media owners to April 1, 1990, when the *Savanna Times Journal* and *Northwest Illinois Dispatch* were acquired by Bob, who already owned the *Carroll County Mirror Democrat* by that time - his father's newspaper business and now legacy.

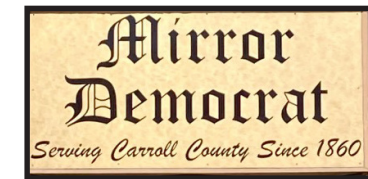
After a transition period, Bob began mailing the newspapers to subscribers. In 2020 the *Northwestern Illinois Dispatch* was discontinued altogether.

“I discontinued publication of the *Dispatch* in 2020 mostly due to the sudden and dramatic decline in advertising

revenue as a result of the covid pandemic, along with the continuing adverse impact on newspaper advertising from social media,” Bob explained.

The *Mirror-Democrat* is the oldest business in Mount Carroll and the *Times Journal* is among the oldest businesses in Savanna, if not the oldest according to Bob.

Today, 2,800 newspapers are printed for weekly distribution -1,400 for each publication. Printing is contracted through Shaw Media in Dixon, Illinois, who in turn contracts with a printing company in Janesville, Wis., to print, label and bundle the papers. The papers are then sent back to Dixon where Bob's courier picks them up every Wednesday morning for delivery to all the post offices and newsstands in Carroll County.



Bob Watson is a 5th generation Watson living in Mt. Carroll, Bob's dad began working at the *Mirror-Democrat* around 1935 and he and his wife bought it in 1949. When Bob's dad died in 1962, Bob's mother sold the newspaper in 1963. And although Bob dabbled in working for his dad as a paper carrier as a young man, and then other newspapers after college in 1972, he then bought the *Mirror-Democrat* in 1980.



Front and center is Bob. Standing, from left to right, Laurie Wilkins, Pam Villalobos, Jeff Kloeping, Samantha Pidde, Mike Nester, Janice Smith and Mary Maszk.

Along with the longevity of the newspapers, comes the longevity of his staff. While the four *Mirror-Democrat/Times-Journal* staff members are half-time employees, they range with 10 to 30 years of tenure and loyalty. Additionally there is a small nucleus of part-time employees who provide news, sports and photo coverage.

According to Bob these staff members are not only community members with the same dedication to the newspapers, but he considers them family in many ways and says he even runs his business as if it is a family operation.

And while today newspapers continue to struggle back from post covid pressure and a fast tracking social media, print media does survive and local news still matters to people.

**“All I know is what I read in the papers.”**

-Will Rogers

According to a recent study by Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Evanston, Illinois, there has been a net loss of 2,886 newspapers in the U.S. since 2005.

The news deserts that the U.S. is experiencing is due primarily to the digital revolution that has shifted readers away from print to smart phones and PCs. And while print advertisers - *a newspaper’s bread and butter* - have fled to digital media, they have not necessarily gone to newspapers’ digital sites either. Today, Google, Meta and Amazon now capture nearly two-thirds of digital ad revenue. For newspapers who statistically receive 80% of their revenue from local job listings, retail, cars and real estate advertising, the transition has been devastating to the print media. Even home delivery circulation of printed newspapers used to be steady and profitable to a newspaper’s bottom line.

And if that isn’t enough, Northwestern University’s study also reported a 70% loss in newspaper employment as well between 2005 -2022.

According to Bob his 2,500 loyal subscribers still want to have a real newspaper in their hands and to be able to read about their local news, coverages of city council, school and county board meetings, schools news, sporting activities, see local photos and even advertising. All a traditional role that a newspaper is supposed to be to their readers.

In addition, research has proven that when local news goes away, civic participation declines, government corruption, spending and borrowing costs rise and misinformation and disinformation flourishes. Print media, on the other hand, has proven to hold people accountable.

“Newspapers bring value,” Bob interjects. “It keeps people honest. I believe in what newspapers do.”

And the future of Carroll County’s newspapers despite what might seem like a gloom and doom outlook?

“Our current plan is to continue publishing the *Mirror-Democrat* and *Times-Journal*,” said Bob. “Weekly newspapers are the heartbeat and soul of a community, chronicling all the comings and goings throughout the years. I am in my 44th year as owner-editor-publisher of the *Mirror-Democrat* (34th for the *Times-Journal*) and hope at some point in the not too distant future that there will be a successor to continuing publishing the *Mirror-Democrat* and *Times-Journal* and serving the communities of Carroll County.

“We have an extremely dedicated group of staff members who take pride in producing the *Mirror-Democrat* and *Times-Journal*,” Bob concluded. “While the evolution of social media has had a significant negative impact on newspapers large and small, we continue to be financially viable thanks to our advertisers and subscribers. It has been an honor and a privilege for us to produce these home town newspapers.”



**Contact and Subscription Details**

**Carroll County Mirror - Democrat**

**Address:** 308 Main Street, PO Box 191  
Mount Carroll, Illinois 61053

**Phone:** 815-244-2411

**Website:** [www.mycarrollcountynews.com](http://www.mycarrollcountynews.com)

**Email:** [mirrordem@grics.net](mailto:mirrordem@grics.net)



**Contact and Subscription Details**

**Savanna Times Journal**

**Address:** 315 Main Street, PO Box 218  
Savanna, Illinois 61074

**Phone:** 815-273-2277

**Website:** [www.mycarrollcountynews.com](http://www.mycarrollcountynews.com)

**Email:** [savtj@grics.net](mailto:savtj@grics.net)