There are 135 years of newspaper history in Fallbrook with some gaps of publication in the early years. These journals are an invaluable record of Fallbrook’s history. The Historical Society continues to research the different newspapers, the timing of them, and their editors.

In 1885, the West Fall Brook townsite was being surveyed. One livery stable, and a hotel were already open for business. Two churches and a temperance union were holding regular meetings. Merchants were buying town lots to build shops. A larger hotel and a school were being planned. There was a strong desire to have a town newspaper. The nearest newspaper was the San Luis Rey Star more than 10 miles away by horseback.
Continuing from Page 1:

The Neff family had a large homestead one mile south of town. They persuaded their son, who worked as a newspaper printer in Sacramento, to come to Fallbrook. A printing press was set up in one the few existing buildings, possibly in Abbotts Hall above the livery stable. This building, better known today as the Oddfellows, is still standing on Beech Street.

Fallbrook Review 1885-1886

Fallbrook’s first newspaperman was 27-year-old Benjamin Neff. The first issue of the Fallbrook Review was April 30, 1885. Social news, advertisements, legal notices, and regional rumors filled the pages. The Review pages were 6 columns wide and printed each Thursday. Subscriptions were $2 a year (in advance) or 75 cents for 3 months. There were less than 200 households in greater Fallbrook in 1885. To make ends meet, 19th century newspapers typically operated a printing business between the weekly publications.
Printing in those days was a demanding, physical job. It involved setting the type, inking the plates, and turning the wheel to press the pages evenly, one page at a time. The Fallbrook Review was only 4 pages per edition, 2 sheets folded, printed front and back. Being the only reporter and the printer; plus selling advertising, subscriptions and collecting payments was a long week. Ben Neff lasted at it for only 2 years. In 1887, young Ben married Mamie Tomlins of the Tomlins Hotel family and took a printing job with the San Diego Union for a steady paycheck and regular work hours. The Fallbrook Review was taken over by J.W. Cheatham, a Fallbrook promoter and real estate agent. The printer G.F. Van Velzer was enticed to come to Fallbrook for a good price on 10 acres of land from Ben’s younger brother, Millard Neff. Cheatham then hired Van Velzer.

Fallbrook Review 1887-1890

Gilbert Francis (G.F.) Van Velzer “rented” Cheatham’s newspaper and became the publisher of the Review, which now had 300 subscribers. The popular Van Velzer family made Fallbrook their home for the next 21 years. A quiet man, G.F. was always listening and jotting down notes for the Review in a small notepad. The newspaper was a family affair. His wife and sons helped to get the weekly newspaper out. In 1990, after 3 years, G.F. retired to his Fallbrook farm to be a fruit grower, also becoming caretaker for the 20 acres of orchards of his new neighbor, Rev. William Pittenger.
Fallbrook *Union* 1892-1893

In January 1892, Van Velzer relaunched his newspaper as the Fallbrook *Union*. The Union is a remarkable 12 pages, following a familiar pattern of reporting on the social and civic news of Fallbrook country, plus strongly advocating for a Fallbrook irrigation district. The *Union* lasted only 22 months. G.F. took his wife on an extended trip by railroad to see the Chicago World's Fair and sold his paper to a printer who was running from trouble.
Fallbrook Observer 1893-1894

Dr. Stephen Bowers renamed the Union as the Fallbrook Observer. The Observer's office was in the original Masonic Hall on N. Main Ave, a building that still stands today. When Van Velzer returned to Fallbrook, Bowers hired him to print the Observer. Bowers’ time in Fallbrook lasted just 6 months, before he sold the newspaper to Montgomery Moulton and left town.

Fallbrook Observer 1895-1896

Montgomery M. Moulton was a 21-year-old Spanish-American War veteran. The Observer lasted just 2 years under Moulton. When the Observer actually stopped publication is not certain. Despite often being away working other jobs, the politically ambitious Moulton continued to list himself in directories as publisher of the Observer through the year 1900. Moulton likely would have needed Van Velzer’s assistance to put out a weekly newspaper, if he actually did. Yet Van Velzer’s son Clare, in his autobiography “In the Year 1900 A Nickel Bought A Lot”, clearly describes helping his father print a newspaper in 1902 and later. There are no known surviving copies of a Fallbrook newspaper after 1896.

Whenever Van Velzer stopped printing, there would not be another Fallbrook newspaper for years until a new publisher came along.
Fallbrook *Enterprise 1911-1995*

Henry Voorhees (H.V.) Alexander came from San Diego and founded the Fallbrook *Enterprise*. The first issue was March 1911 and just 4 pages. Economic conditions were improving in Fallbrook after the 1896 national depression. The Smelser family had arrived and founded Citizens Commercial Bank. They started the Commercial Club, a forerunner of today’s Chamber of Commerce. Alexander created the *Enterprise* to be an unabashed supporter of the virtues of Fallbrook, loudly promoting coming economic opportunities. Alexander would retire in 1919 but the *Enterprise* would go on uninterrupted for the next 84 years.

And that’s another story.

Tom Frew

References:

Manuscript by G.F. Van Velzer and autobiography by his son F.C. Van Velzer.

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Huntington Library rare newspaper files.

Biography of Stephen Bowers by Wallace E. Smith.

San Diego County directories

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The Fallbrook Historical Society’s mission is to bring history to life by educating the community and others about Fallbrook’s rich heritage

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