

St Francis Chronicle's history..

By Bev Mortimer

Some pages from the very first edition!

It was 15 years ago when I started St Francis Chronicle. I never came to St Francis to be a newspaper Editor - though I have filled the roles of journalist, photographer, foreign correspondent and Editor on publications for more than 30 years.

I came to the Eastern Cape initially in 2002 to explore the province itself so as to undergo a tour guide course.

I had for the previous four years given up full time journalism to become a tour guide and continue my great love of travel writing. I had completed a number of guided tours for four provinces, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, the North West and Limpopo. I had five more provinces to complete in order to become a national guide.

Unfortunately I just missed the Eastern Cape course in October 2002 and had to wait until February 2003 for the next one which took place in Knysna. I decided to have a working holiday, doing freelance writing and temporary local work until the next course started.

While waiting, I did some travelling round the Eastern Cape to acquaint myself with towns so as to assist me as a tour guide for this province. I aimed to use St Francis Bay as a base as I like countless others, fell in love with the place during a holiday here. After the course in Knysna I planned to go to Cape Town and do the Western and Northern Cape tour guide courses.

While talking to friends one day in December 2002 in St Francis, it was suggested that with my background I should start a newspaper here. A newspaper? I had never planned that but had often, like many journalists wistfully dreamed about having my own newspaper one day.

With lots of local goading and encouragement, I decided to give it a try, telling myself that if it did not work out I would revert to my original tour guide plan, taking the ET course later in 2003 or in 2004.

Well, I never did the Eastern Cape tour guide course as St Francis Chronicle has kept me so busy! Today I am even busier having started an online daily news edition in May 2011.

In February 2003 I started walking door to door in St Francis Bay, Humansdorp and Jeffreys Bay armed with printed price lists and a mock-up sample of what the actual A3 tabloid newspaper would look like...

Working door to door - who does that today? The reason was that few businesses had Internet in those days. Face to face and by phone was the form of communication. Instead of using the postal service I hand delivered a copy of my prices to potential customers.

I would park and walk three blocks traversing both sides of the streets in the bigger towns then walk back to my car and move it up another three blocks. I wore out several pairs of sandals and shoes in that year...

Being a newcomer there was a lot of interest and encouragement from locals but also some scepticism. I stuck with the former and I was after a month, away for a year, producing with the help of a young learner, the first few free editions of the paper on a monthly basis.

The first edition was a layout disaster... with gaps and no formal structure or neatness. I had to take some time to re-organise to get it right. When the printers left for London I burnt the midnight oil learning Corel Draw and how to improve the layout of the paper.

The past 15 years has been an on-going learning curve, having to keep up with changing printers' technologies. Almost every year I have undertaken updated courses in journalism to keep abreast of changing trends, especially in social media.

The lack of widespread email and graphic artists in those early years also meant that I would make up an advert for a client, print it out on my printer then drive to the client's premises and leave the advert there for the client's approval. Unless he was able to approve it straight away, I would then either get the changes by phone or drive back to pick up the changes; then make the changes and print a clean copy to take back to the client's premises for final approval. I soon found an alternative to help me with this task so that I could concentrate on layout and finding and writing stories...

After the third edition an almost identical looking tabloid appeared in St Francis Bay on the shop shelves and was also free and monthly. Advertising prices were lower than mine and many clients jumped ship as there were rumours that I was just a fly-by-night - as indeed there were many businesses that breezed in and out of town in 2003-2004 and in subsequent years.

I had to drop prices too and subsidise my paper heavily with my savings (I still do). I worked hard to up my game and increase my readership. After a few months many advertisers returned and after 6 months the rival paper belonging to a top newspaper group in the country, folded. There have been other competitors over the years but as a wise businessman once told me, "Competition is good! It keeps you up your standards..."

It is interesting that some of the clients from the very first issues in 2003 and the first five years, are still advertising in St Francis Chronicle - for example, Calibre Security and The Terminator, who is wonderful and so special, plus Pam Golding and Top Carpets, Tobias, Papiesfontein, and Harvey World Travel, KC Properties, and others continuously

supported me without adjusting a single month me for at least 10 years!.

Many businesses that were around in 2003 in St Francis Bay are no longer around today. Only two restaurants, Big Time Taverna and Joe Fish are still around. Out of the estate agents only Pam Golding, B&G Estates, the Coopers' estate agency (now called Harcourts) and Seal Point Estates, have continuously operated in St Francis. Only one garden service, Village Garden Service, and two pubs, Legends and the Park-Off Pub, are still around. Only a couple or so of shops, Balibong, Scribbels and the pharmacy are still around and only about two construction companies are still around.

From around 2005 many newcomers to the area arrived and have stayed, which is great to see. As the village business area grew, so did the St Francis Chronicle, producing some bumper editions... the biggest was a 48 page.

Then as the world's economy grew dark in 2008 and people started holding onto their purse strings, advertising dwindled the world over, on and off line, and most local businesses experienced hiccups.

But with the Lord's help I have always seen able to make necessary adjustments and to develop my writing talents and to continue with the work given me to help people and promote businesses on or offline.

In 2011, after receiving requests from editors countryside for more info on the news of a burglar shot dead in a St Francis Bay home, I decided that the time was ripe to have a serious online daily edition as some news just cannot wait a month to be told in print.

The online news edition I started as a trial took off faster than the lowly St Francis Chronicle did and has proved highly popular. In times of floods and fires and bridges washing away, the country's top media houses and even the world's top print, radio and TV media (as in the case of the first fire) have sought my help for photos, articles and interviews. We were totally amazed to learn from the official owners to the web site, Word Press, that we had 172 000 hits on 12 November 2012! That was the most horrific night of the big fire, when I was so overcome to watch grown men cry with tears running down their faces as they helplessly watched their homes burn to the ground, across the road in front of us in Spray Avenue...

The art of writing, of finding and crafting a story is a passion with me... and I repeat what I wrote in 2003... "We are here for the long haul... to be of service to the community and our readers at large... to my friends near and far, who supported me with their encouragement and advice, and to my readers and advertisers who supported and enjoyed reading the Chronicle over the years, we wish you all continuous enjoyment in the future."

We continue to thank and appreciate all those companies who continue to support us... many have been supporting us for the past 10 years! It has been an amazing, though often challenging 15 years!

The past has not been without challenges. The future as we see it will not be without further challenges.

Newspapers are dwindling and the online newspaper will grow with its own set of challenges and competition... but it will be a long while before newspapers disappear altogether... as esteemed, world famous economist, Warren Buffet, has said, "He, himself, a few years back, bought up more than 66 community newspapers as a show of support for their future!"

The following are his remarks in favour of community newspapers. "Newspapers continue to reign supreme in the delivery of local news. If you want to know what's going on in your town - whether the news is about the mayor or taxes or high school sports - there is no substitute for a local newspaper in towns and cities where there is a strong sense of community..."

"There is no more important institution than the local paper. We favour towns and cities with a strong sense of community..."

"If the citizens of a town care little about their community, they will eventually care little about the community newspaper," Buffett wrote. "I believe newspapers that intently cover their communities will have a good future," he said, adding that he believes the Internet and blogs will never replace the local newspaper for community news.

A big challenge has been the increased number of media targeting Knoug's businesses for advertising... but St Francis Chronicle is pleased and grateful for its supporters and that its popularity continues to grow. We have growing numbers of social media friends and receive continual friend requests.

We decided to start selling the paper in May 2017 for a mere R5 as printers' fees increased drastically (amid quite a bit of derision and comments of "I wish I bit my tongue"). Maybe some locals don't, but the visitors love the paper (and they are the ones businesses want in their shops) and over the past season we had very high sales.

In deep gratitude I thank all those friends, advertisers and readers who kept on encouraging me and supporting me over the years and for all their letters, emails or messages of thanks over the years.

God Bless you all!