

Northeastern

## How one tiny Ontario town makes the news

*The Town of Latchford, in Timiskaming District on the Montreal River, has a population of roughly 300. (Wikipedia/P199)*

When the Town of Latchford saw local media coverage drying up, it launched its own monthly news publication — the “Moose Call”

By Josh Sherman - Published on Sep 21, 2020



When George Lefebvre made stops at a favourite breakfast joint back in the '80s, the menu wasn't the only thing he'd read: the South River restaurant, which he'd pass en route to Toronto, laid out copies of a local newsletter on the tables. “We thought the idea would work for Latchford,” says Lefebvre, long-time mayor of the northeastern Ontario town.

Lefebvre, who has been active in Latchford politics for about 40 years as a councillor, mayor, and treasurer, felt that his town, home to about 300, lacked media attention. “The weekly newspapers were in transition where they used to have columns from each of the municipalities in their coverage area,” he says. “They sort of transitioned out of that.” Thinking the community could use another platform for local voices, he and his wife, Sharon, set about creating what he describes as a “promotional handout” in July 1988, recruiting several volunteers from the seniors' club. Dubbed the *Moose Call*, it was distributed for free to local gas stations and restaurants and handed out at his wife's gift shop. “After two months,” he says, “people were appealing for it to continue.”

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Since the beginning, the publication has taken a light-hearted approach. Flipping through recent issues — each of which is 12 pages long and photocopied on folded legal-sized paper — readers will find Lefebvre’s regular update, titled “Just Passin Through Again,” followed by recipes, a gardening column, jokes, and puzzles. “We just want to lighten it up,” explains Lefebvre, who credits past and present volunteers for the publication’s warm reception and longevity.

Charlie Johnson, who joined the *Moose Call*’s roster about two years ago, pens a monthly column under the sobriquet “Charlie by the lake.” Like the other contributors, he doesn’t have a formal journalism background. However, before moving to Latchford five years ago, he put out his own newsletter, *Charlie From the Bush*, about living “off the grid” in the Lorrain Valley. “I guess the object of that paper and the object of my articles is really entertainment, you know?” For the September issue, the 77-year-old jotted down his thoughts about coffee. For Rhonda Legault, her gardening column is a chance to spark creativity at home. “That’s the whole point of it is to give ideas, to give tips — or what I’ve learned along the way — to inspire people to go out in their yard.”

*George Lefebvre and his wife, Sharon, first distributed the “Moose Call” in July 1988. (Courtesy of George Lefebvre)*

Its focus on soft news hasn’t kept the *Moose Call* from stirring up controversy. Once, Lefebvre riffed on a barn being converted into a bingo hall and included a joke from his nephew: “How do you get 400 old cows into a barn? You put a bingo sign on the front.” Not everyone found it funny. “I thought it was so cute I put it in the *Moose Call*,” he says. “I got myself in a hell of a lot of trouble with some old women.”

The newsletter is municipally funded as a tourism initiative, and subscriptions, donations, and ad sales recoup its production costs, Lefebvre says. According to Jaime Allen, the town’s clerk-treasurer, Latchford set aside \$1,500 for the *Moose Call* in the 2020 budget, roughly matching the revenue it brings in — not counting copy expenses, which the town absorbs. “It pretty much breaks even,” Allen says.

Over the years, the *Moose Call*, which today boasts about 130 subscribers, down from a peak of more than 300, has reached well beyond Latchford’s borders in Timiskaming District on the Montreal River. Copies have been sent as far as Moscow, where a former resident moved; another past denizen took copies to Saudi Arabia and shared them with oil-industry coworkers keen to learn English. Keeping those who’ve moved on up to date with affairs in Latchford is one of the things that makes the periodical important, says Lefebvre, citing obituaries as an example: “Without that information appearing in the *Moose Call*, [former residents] would never know that they may have lost a friend.

The bulletin has also played a small-but-significant role in northeastern Ontario’s local-media landscape. John R. Hunt, who wrote for the *North Bay Nugget* for 67 years, sometimes cited it in his own columns. “There wasn’t much coverage of Latchford,” says Hunt, 95, of the publication’s relevance. “The *Moose Call* provided some local coverage of what was going on in Latchford.” He remembers at least one occasion on which it broke news, beating all the other publications in the region to a story. “There was a big fire — a

gas line caught fire — and George [Lefebvre] actually scooped everybody,” says the long-time Cobalt resident, who penned his final piece for the *Nugget* last year. “He had a report on it before anybody else knew about it.” Lefebvre remembers it well: “We got some attention for that.”

*The “Moose Call” is municipally funded as a tourism initiative. (Courtesy of Rhonda Legault)*

The shortage of local news has only intensified in the 32 years since the *Moose Call*’s launch. Ryerson journalism professor April Lindgren, who founded the Local News Research Project, which is tracking newspaper closures during COVID-19, says that puts towns and cities in a tough spot. “Municipalities have increasingly been concerned about the loss of news coverage of what’s happening in their communities, because it just makes their jobs more difficult,” she says. If locals can’t get information about upcoming council decisions, they may not have the chance to get involved, she notes. The city may want to get word out about roadwork, she says or politicians may want the opportunity to say, “Hey, look what I did — pat me on the back.”

Other municipalities, she notes, have been trying to address local-news shortages through their own initiatives. “In Brampton, for instance, I did a study of their efforts to produce press releases in more than just English to reach their more diverse population,” she says. Though she considers efforts such as the *Moose Call* “admirable,” she believes they’re no substitute for traditional journalism. “My concern is that people who live in any community should not mistake information for journalism,” she says. “And we need to make a distinction between being supplied with information versus being supplied with news that we know ... has been verified, independently produced by identifiable people, and is timely.”

As papers have shuttered, the *Moose Call* has survived recessions, the rise of the internet, and a global pandemic. Does Lefebvre see it living on indefinitely? “No,” he says. “It was the flavour in the day that outlasted its life expectancy considerably.”

For now, though, editor Bill Vandenhooogen is doing what he can to keep the publication — which he calls “part of Latchford” — alive. He took on the role 11 years ago, when the previous editor fell ill, and hasn’t looked back. “I really didn’t want this paper to die, and I don’t think there was anyone else available to do it,” he says. “So many things have been and gone ... but this is the only thing that actually has been over 30 years, and it’s still going. Let’s just keep this thing going. It’s a nice little paper.”

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