

## Petersburg Observer & Sangamon Valley Signs

By Dan Williams, V.P., Petersburg Chamber of Commerce

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**Background:** Since 1874 the Petersburg Observer has served Menard County and has been a tremendous resource for the community. It's articles and photos have provided a rich history of our town for nearly 150 years. It's been a lifeline for many who have moved away, including sons and daughters who stay in touch with our hometown. The stories chronicle how life was at any given point in time. The photos show how much the town and people have changed. The ads remind us of the products, trends and pricing that seem unbelievable today compared with a century ago. The Observer has been sort of a link to our own Mayberry.

**Owners:** The newspaper had various owners between 1874 and 1925 when S. L. Shaw bought the newspaper and managed the business until his death in 1973. His son, W.F. Shaw, then became manager and continued in that capacity until his death in 1981. Today the business is still owned by the Petersburg Observer Company and is presently managed by Jane Shaw Cutright, daughter and granddaughter of the two long-time publishers and managers. Her son Jason is the fourth generation working in the business and he manages the Sangamon Valley Signs and Graphics division.

**About the Business:** The Observer is presently published each Thursday and has a circulation of more than 3,100 in the Petersburg, Talulla, Oakford, Atterberry and Rock Creek areas. In addition, the firm publishes the Menard County Review covering the Greenview and Athens areas. The Review is the outgrowth of the Greenview Review and the Athens Free Press, which were combined into one publication several years ago. The Greenview Review was purchased by the Observer Company in 1961 and the Athens Free Press in 1968. The Menard County Review is published each Friday and has a circulation of more than 1,500. For area residents, the newspaper is a must read to stay apprised of local events and friends and family in the local news.

The printing equipment that they use to print the newspaper includes a two-unit web offset press installed in 1992 that is capable of printing up to eight broadsheet pages at one time at the rate of up to 20,000 per hour. Other equipment includes computers for setting type and ads, necessary camera and plate making equipment, plus other machinery used in producing both the newspapers and a variety of commercial printing. In addition to printing the aforementioned newspapers, the company also produces several other weekly newspapers for neighboring publishers as well as magazines and booklets for area schools, churches and organizations.

The composition and paste-up area of the plant is where the type prepared elsewhere is combined with advertisements, pictures and other items to make up the completed pages of the publications. When the pages are completed, they are photographed using a large camera, and a negative is the end result. After the negative is shot on the camera, it is processed in a developing machine where it is developed, fixed, washed and dried. The negatives are then combined with other negatives and taken to a plate burner, where they are placed on top of a light-sensitive aluminum plate that are then exposed using a 6,000 watt high intensity light. The action of the light exposes a portion of the light-sensitive coating on the plate, which is then run through a developing machine where a developer is spread over its surface. The developer sticks to the exposed portion of the plate, resulting in an image that is readily visible. At the same time, the remainder of the plate is scrubbed clean, and when the plate comes out of this machine it is ready to be placed on the press. Printed material is not produced by the actual plates, but from the ink they deposit on a flat, rubber blanket that produces the necessary backward image. The paper used for printing then comes in contact with the blanket, and the result is the positive image that the readers hold in their hands.

The Observer uses recycled papers and soy ink. Approximately 80% of their paper is made of recycled materials and the soy inks replace the need for petroleum-based inks, thus helping the environment. The operation is high tech and their printers can print signs as large as 100 inches in width and to about any length. With regard to the printing of the Observer, the paper rolls are 1,000 pounds and come 34" wide and 40" in diameter.

**Sangamon Valley Signs & Graphics:** This division of the company produces high quality printed products for businesses and organizations, ranging from business cards to billboard signs. Some of the more commonly produced items include: posters, banners, signs of all sizes, bumper stickers, magnetic signs, invoices, business forms, letterhead, envelopes, photo enlargements and auto decals.

Jason hopes that some day one or more of his children or relatives will continue the family tradition. He and his staff provide design as well as production services for about any printing job. "We will help our customers with a logo or design to make a high quality product. Our top two goals are quality and customer satisfaction. When we help with design we can save our customers money and keep their cost down," according to Jason.

In addition to traditional printing, they can also silk-screen t-shirts, company logo attire, jackets and more. They can even have company names and logos embroidered onto shirts, caps and more. Team jerseys, sweat-shirts and other garments can also be customized with your logo and name.

**Future Goals:** The newspaper and printing business have undergone many technological advances over the years. The computers and software allow staff to produce the paper and the ads each week. Their staff is a valuable asset to many businesses and organizations as they can take text and details and make a compelling ad. The sign division can produce a wide range of business products – all right here in Petersburg.

**Employees:** The Petersburg Observer has three full-time and three part-time employees. Jane Shaw Cutright is publisher and editor; Jason Cutright is manager of Sangamon Valley Signs & Graphics, Doug Willis is production manager of the Observer. Part-time employees include, Denise Boeker, Keri Vogt & Jeanne Weaver.

**Summary:** On a personal note as the author of this weekly column, I would like to thank Jane and all of the staff of the Petersburg Observer for their vital role in our community. They are always willing to help cover local stories and events, including our promotion of Chamber of Commerce businesses. We are very fortunate to have a local paper like the Observer and Menard County Review and appreciate their contributions to our community. Hours: Monday, Tuesday & Thursday • 8 am – 5 pm ~ Wednesday • 7 am – 4 pm ~ Friday • 8 am – 4 pm. They are closed daily for lunch • Noon – 1 pm.

NOTE: The Chamber is featuring articles and additional photos on all of its member businesses on our website at [www.PetersburgILChamber.com](http://www.PetersburgILChamber.com). The Chamber encourages area residents to "Shop Local" and keep jobs and the tax base alive in Menard County. Check out our other great stores and businesses in the Petersburg area.