



A Tale of Two Weeklies

Episode 6: The Merger

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Curtis Wright: This animosity is kind of pathetic. I think the product should be as good as we can do and we put all of our egos behind us cause we all have one role is to create good content so people read it.

Ron Garth: I didn't want to be in a position to get in the way. I guess I could've helped out from time to time, but it, it's, it was his, it wasn't mine anymore.

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NARR: For 26 years two rival magazines existed as the alternative weekly press in one blue collar, Canadian Prairie city. This is the story of Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine, two weekly papers that ran in Edmonton between 1992 and 2018. This is an elegy and love letter to those papers. Their rise, glory days, notorious rivalry and eventual decline. I'm Andrew Paul. I'm Fawnda Mithrush. I'm Paul Blinov and this is A Tale of Two Weeklies.

NARR: Since 1995 Edmonton's two all weekly newspapers Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine had been at odds. They were two weeklies in what had probably only ever been a one weekly town, and for 15 years they had fought for advertising dollars, to one up each other with story ideas and in depth interviews, and to try and drive readers focuses one way or another. Even though most people read both, they were after all free to pick up, but in the early months of 2011 the longstanding rivalry was finally going to reach a conclusion. The hatchet would be buried, kind of. In the end. There would be just one paper left standing. It would be staffed by people from both publications. Vue and SEE would merge together under one name in a last ditch attempt to stave off the print media's increasingly bleak prospects even as they came together ending more than a decade of rivalry. The question of who among both papers staffs would retain their jobs remained. Two newsrooms met, blended together, and worked away on the next issue, all while waiting to hear who would stay and who would go. It's hard to imagine anyone



at Vue or SEE predicting that their rivalry would end in anything other than one paper's victory and the other's complete destruction. Certainly, few would have expected a coming together of any sorts was in the cards, but by 2010 it was obvious that something had to change. Neither paper was seeing the advertising they once had. While Vue had managed to keep itself around 40 pages per week, SEE had dwindled in size to an average of 28 pages per issue. In 2009 Mike Siek was Vue Weekly's production manager. He more or less understood the history of the paper split, but it's something that happened before his time there. He experienced the division more in terms of the scarcity of resources it caused for both papers.

Mike Siek: I knew that there was definitely a personal situation between Ron and someone over there. And it was related to a history that I was not involved with and it didn't fully understand. I also knew that we had been competing for ad dollars for many years and it had held both of us back, both papers back. Had there only been one paper in Edmonton in the 90s and early 2000s it might have created a situation where the paper that was the only paper would have survived until today perhaps. But I doubt it. That's like hard to imagine that it wasn't, I don't think the two of them competing that that had any relation to the fact that they're no longer here. It was just the world changed.

NARR: By the late 2000s print media is growing. Instability was beginning to buckle the industry. The internet was hoovering money away from print through free online classifieds and its wide range advertising opportunities, and readership was drifting. Print publications across North America were hemorrhaging in ways they'd never hemorrhaged before. Everyday journalists were being asked to do more work with less resources all while trying to keep up with the speed of the internet and it's thirst for as it happens coverage. The results were manifesting in myriad ways, but in Edmonton it seemed to take the form of strange bedfellows. In 2010 a media conglomerate called Postmedia purchased the paper of record in Edmonton, the Edmonton Journal. Five years later, Postmedia would acquire the Sun newspaper chain as well. While both papers continued publishing, as of today's date in December 2019 they both still are publishing, they were being made in a single newsroom, which still diligently put out two different daily spins on the exact same stories and coverage. Which all seemed like a smoke and mirrors approach, hiding the trickle away of resources and reporting power behind the appearance of two daily outlets. Years before that, around the same time that Postmedia was acquiring the Journal, the merging of the alt weeklies was starting to play out. Ron Garth, Vue Weekly's longstanding publisher and owner, had sold his ownership of the paper to Robert or Bob Doull. Doull was president of Aberdeen Publishing, which owned and operated a series of small publications across British Columbia and Alberta.

Ron Garth: Because I knew Bob for years before that and he published, he'd helped Dan with the Calgary Straight. And I used to go down and pick his brain, you know, cause he'd been publishing stuff forever. And he was a good friend. He still is a good friend of Dan McLeod. So there is lots to be learned for me. And then when it came time to step aside, it made sense. Bob was interested in that's, that's where it would go because he had all



of that business, that background. I mean he was working with Dan and the Georgia Straight from the beginning. Yeah. So he was no stranger to what was necessary.

NARR: Doull was interested in Vue Weekly and Garth was, after a decade and a half, ready to let it go. Doull cordially declined to be interviewed for this project, but noted in an email that the paper's vision was always Garth's. And that Doull "really only stepped in when he needed financial help to keep it going." Garth's name remained in the masthead until the very end listed as the papers founding publisher Ron and his son Mike Garth went on to found Greenline Distribution, which began using their small fleet of Japanese vans to distribute publications all over the city, including Vue. But aside from its physical delivery, Garth kept a certain distance from the paper. Once he let go of its reins, he'd popped by the Christmas parties, but didn't attempt to remain as an influence on its pages. After keeping his independent outfit afloat for 20 some years with no legal victory against SEE and increasing financial issues at his own paper, Ron Garth had made peace with stepping back from publishing.

Ron Garth: I didn't want to be in a position to get in the way. I guess I could've helped out from time to time, but it, it's, it was, this wasn't minor anymore and that was, that was time I was tired too. I mean, I'm old, you know, it just look at me.

NARR: For the record, in 2019, Ron Garth is now 74 years old. He was 47 when he started SEE and 50, when he organized the midnight run to start up Vue Weekly.

Ron Garth: We'd all done it for a long time, like years, 23 years, 20 years, whatever it was. It was a long time. You would just relentless and so that and the struggling with the finances and the legal stuff, the disappointment of that ultimately not working out.

NARR: Back in episode two of this series, we mentioned that in 2005 Garth filed a claim against the government of Canada, Conrad Black, Hollinger Incorporated, and SEE Magazine for \$5.7 million in damages. He also names numerous others in this suit, eleven defendants in total. Garth's claim alleged that because Black had renounced his Canadian citizenship and Black was owner of Hollinger and part shareholder in Great West newspapers at the time, that SEE, being owned by Great West, wasn't actually a Canadian magazine, and therefore owed significant tax revenues resulting from advertising sales. The crux of the claim being that Vue should be the one to collect on those tax revenues. As Garth mentioned, the suit ultimately didn't work out. They waited for a hearing until June, 2007 when the claim was dismissed in the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench. Garth filed an appeal. The appeal went to the Alberta Court of Appeal in 2009, which was also dismissed. Garth appealed again, but in 2011, filed a discontinuance of claim ending his years long damn-the-corporate man lawsuit. The result of this case is published online. We can share a link to some of the proceedings in the show notes, but initially when we tried to search for this case at court of Queen's Bench, it didn't come up. Someone had misspelled the word 'weekly' when recording the litigant, Vue Weekly, in its filing. Just a reminder to thank your copy editors, folks, they're important people.



Ron Garth: I made my peace with that right away and everything after that has been somebody else's, you know, that was his, that was yours and whoever else worked. But I was, I was fine. I think yeah. I had attributed to 20 years of burnout.

NARR: Over at SEE magazine, the dwindling page counts were as apparent to staff as anybody on the outside, it's editorial roster had become a revolving door with few editors staying for significant lengths of time. The papers then publisher was Jeff Holubitsky, a former daily news reporter who had taken a buyout at the Edmonton Journal, then became the publisher of SEE in 2009.

Jeff Holubitsky: Well, I knew we were struggling the whole time. I tried to keep a brave face for the staff to give everybody out, but I knew for a long time we were struggling. There were meetings where there were, you know, they weren't unpleasant, but it was what it was. Duff and Brian were scratching their heads, when's this ever going to turn around? You know, he's doing what he's doing. Is he doing enough? Is he the guy? Can you know what I mean? I can't, I wasn't, I didn't know. I don't have the skills to go out and like force people to buy ads. You know Todd would probably be much better at that.

NARR: Remember that lawsuit from our first two episodes where the receivers of SEE Magazine and Great West sued Ron Garth and Vue for his printing bill plus damages? The one that was filed back in 1995? Basically it was tucked away for the better part of 16 years. Garth and Vue didn't have the money to settle and they never counter suit on that claim, so the SEE receivers never got their money. That is until someone bought SEE Magazine in spring of 2011. Great West gave Holubitsky a heads up that the paper was being sold and what that meant for the staff and future of SEE magazine.

Jeff Holubitsky: So essentially I was taken out for lunch two weeks before and said, keep this quiet but in two weeks this is what's happening. We're going to come to the office and fire everybody, including you. And I thought we are screwed.

NARR: Craig Janzen, who had been art director at SEE at the time, recalls what was quite possibly the aftermath of that very lunch, along with another moment when he felt the writing was on the wall for SEE. Janzen is now living and working in Japan as an English teacher, we were able to catch up with him in a Tokyo dessert cafe in March, 2019.

Craig Janzen: Probably two moments that stick out in my mind. One was right after Best of Edmonton, which we were being hailed as like the most profitable Best of Edmonton ever. And so they bought us pizza and beer, and in the toast, kind of was like made a joke about here's to next year. And Jeff kind of gets pale and was like maybe maybe next year. And the other moment was going out to my car and Jeff had left work a little bit early and go out and he's sitting in his car and it looks like he's just staring blankly at a tree, off in the distance and doesn't look happy. Kind of like someone who has no clue what to do. Those were about probably a week or two before Great West came in and told us with a heavy heart that we were being sold to Bob Doull.



NARR: In 2010 Andy Cookson was a sales representative at SEE Magazine. He was there when the news was broken to SEE staff. It had been his day off.

Andy Cookson: That week, I remember I booked time off and Jeff Holubitsky asked me to come in for Friday for a meeting. He was not really clear about what it was going to be for, but it was gonna be something that was mandatory. And so I came in on my, my book day off expecting to just like come sit in on a maybe a quick meeting in the board room and we're all lined up in the lunch room area, the kitchen area and chairs and Jeff and Brian Buchinsky from Great West announced that the paper is closing and that someone who was buying the paper and that he'd be in momentarily to discuss it all with us. And so they left and all the, basically the people that we reported to at SEE or Great West walked out the door and everyone was just sitting kind of murmuring to each other, not knowing who's going to keep their jobs, who, what is going to happen, who this person is that's going to take over.

Paul Blinov: Did they just, did they take any questions or was it like, here's the announcement. Put our coats on out the door. I

Andy Cookson: It was pretty much a mic drop of just like, we're out and we're, you know, best of luck. So and then Bob Doull walked in and it took a couple of minutes to sit down and smile at everybody and then explain that he was the new owner of Vue and SEE magazine I guess that he had purchased. And so they're going to be merging the two and that he would be interviewing everybody over the next week trying to figure out where the redundancies were and try to find something that made sense moving forward. And so, you know, obviously we were all a little panicked at the time because I mean for me, I mean working in the sales side and being, you know, somewhat relatively new, I think at that point I'd only been at SEE for a year or two. I didn't have quite the career than anyone in the editorial end had in certainly in the attachments to the publication that they had. So I know there some people that were working for SEE at that time that were very anxious about if there would be a role for them, because we didn't need to have two full teams. Obviously cuts are going to be made.

NARR: One of those cuts was Holubitsky. Right from the start. He felt excluded by the new ownership and didn't like the tone of his first experiences with them. After the announcement to SEE's staff, he left and never went back.

Jeff Holubitsky: So I sat at my desk the next day and the owner was there and they called a news meeting, but didn't invite me. They're quite rude, you know, in fact, totally rude. I was not too impressed. So by the time they had the news meeting without me, I just put my jacket on and I went home and I never went back. I texted him at the end of the day, said, by you may have discovered I'm not around. I asked him what his plans were for me and he didn't have an answer. So I thought, well, I'm wasting my time here.

NARR: In an interview with mediamag.ca shortly after the merger Doull said, "Holubitsky left when we bought SEE because there was going to be a lot of change and it wasn't really



for him. He had already retired once.” That he had retired once is true, but the end of SEE wasn't the end of Holubitsky's career in journalism.

Jeff Holubitsky: Well after that I went on, I got a job pretty quickly at the Sun where I worked for about six months writing ad features and that sort of thing. I really was not a good fit for that. And then the Journal came along and I went back to the Journal for about six months as a copy editor and I loved it. I was fitting in well around there and they announced more cutbacks. So you know, clearly I had already had a buyout from them. I wasn't going to be a guy they kept, you know, so that ended after about six months. And then I was the editor of the St. Albert Gazette for about two years.

NARR: That interview Doull gave to mediomag also references a post that he wrote on the Vue website shortly after the merger. In the post, Doull states that the initial plan was to operate both SEE and Vue until a team could be assembled to carry out a soft merger. However, demand from readers, contributors, advertisers, and suppliers caused the integration to happen more rapidly, which on the inside of the soon to be just one office made for a stiff tense month. Curtis Wright had been SEE Magazine's entertainment editor at the time of the merge and recalls his first meeting with the Vue staff as somewhat uncomfortable

Curtis Wright: When the magazines merged, I remember going to the Vue offices. It was the day that the Winnipeg Jets were announced that they were coming back and league. That's why I remember it. And we all met in this boardroom and it was pretty awkward. I thought nice enough people for sure, but you kind of have an alignment with your own team, if you will. So it was, it was an awkward, just an awkward day for sure.

NARR: Everyone was moved into SEE magazine's office. It was farther from the center of the city and larger and thus a cheaper, more spacious way of handling the doubling of a newsroom. There were suddenly two people for every role at the paper, two production managers, two news editors, and that rapid integration Doull mentioned meant that just a few weeks later there would be just one of everyone. Everyone on staff was acutely aware of this as they attempted to settle in. While the SEE office was fairly open concept, there was a row of desks and computers that sat in one hairpin turn around a wall from the rest of the office. That's where the former SEE editors were during this period. On the other side of that particular wall, the former Vue editors took up their spaces. It was a physical divide that doubled as a strange symbolic representation of the old divide between the papers as people kept to the desks near their former crews, at least in editorial sections, production and advertising were in parts of the building that didn't have the same conveniently symbolic wall to divide them. Mike Siek remembers his thought process at the time.

Mike Siek: But when that merger happened, there were people on both sides of that merger because it was both were purchased by the same owner. And as far as I understand, the owner did the best they could to take care of the people that, both organizations within his capacity to do. So trying to make sure that at the end of the day, the best outcome,



the best sort of lay quality came out of the content creation process. You know, that was stuff that happened behind the scenes that I didn't fully understand and I was just for a while wondering whether I'd have a job next week, every week. So, and I think that each of us that were involved in that merger would probably in that boat, but every time that we would meet with the owner, he was very open, very honest, a little frank, which was good. I liked that and it didn't help me know that I would keep my job, but at least to help me understand he was doing what he could to create the best possible outcome for everyone as far as I understood it. Right. And not everyone had a good experience through that process for sure, but I managed to survive it. Luckily.

NARR: During this transitional period, the staff were told that the masthead would be adjusted. Nobody would have their former titles. In the masthead of Vue Weekly's June 2nd printing of 2011 the first issue made with the combined newsroom, the entire team editorial, production and advertising. We're simply credited as staff in an alphabetical listing, which Craig Janzen recalls did little to quell the uncertainty in the air.

Craig Janzen: Yeah, there was a lot of tension, mostly the SEE staff was because I think we felt a little bit more shafted than anyone. The guys from Vue, I will give them this. They were really like, nice day. You could hardly tell we were enemies if, but that's always been the case. Like if I was out at a bar and I saw someone from Vue that I know we'd sit down and have a drink, no problem. So it's kind of like working with friends that happened to might take your job. A lot of the SEE staff though did not see it that way. They were really stressed and I'm not surprised that a lot of them got themselves fired, to be honest. I think they made it harder for themselves and resisted a lot more than they should have.

NARR: The names on the mass had remained title-less for another week. The week after that roles were at least broken down and separated by department. Two names under news, two under music, four under production, and so on. Finally, in the June 23rd edition, it began to settle, one name for every title. And in the end the job retention heavily favored the Vue staff. All Vue's editors kept their jobs in production to Vue staffers, Pete Nguyen and Lyle Bell stayed on payroll with one SEE staffer. Craig Janzen remaining as well and advertising Vue had only one sales rep, Rob Lightfoot. Now it was Rob and four others, Erin Campbell, Andy Cookson, Carrie Duperron, and Megan Hall. Curtis Wright, who had been SEE's entertainment editor, became the staff writer.

Curtis Wright: In this one meeting. Specifically, it was right after the merger and this is where I, I kept my job for as long as I did with this statement. This is what Eden had told me. Even at one point. I basically said, you know, this animosity is so immature that it's not, it's not and I don't really speak out in group meetings very often. You know, and I was like this animosity is kind of pathetic. I think the product should be as good as we can do and we put all of our egos behind us cause we all have one role is to create good content so people read it and you know, be employed. Just the baseline kind of a measure.



NARR: Chelsea Boos who had been one of Vue's production team found herself out of a job. There's a lot of background sound in this interview. Our co-producer Paul Blinov and Boos met at Khazana, an Indian restaurant where for a few years the Vue staff would often end up once the paper was out the door for the week.

Chelsea Boos: Yeah. The actual lead up to it was sort of hopeful. I thought like, Oh yeah, I remember Bob even saying like, we're, we're looking for a, we don't want to just move this office to see office. Like we could find a new place like start fresh kind of so everyone can fit in a new new space. And I actually went to like real estate listings and was looking for an office fit everyone. And then I remember feeling like such a fool, like I fell for, I fell for his trick.

Paul Blinov: And what they never moved from that office. That was where the papers stayed until it ended.

NARR: And that office was where Vue remained until the paper closed in 2018 where the old one had been minutes from the downtown core. The new one was much further North and West. It was a significant distance from the hotspots in the city. The places where protests or important announcements would take place. And if you know anything about Edmonton's public transit system, having a car is kind of essential. And many weekly staffers didn't have cars. Samantha Power, Vue Weekly's news editor at the time, remembers how the distance affected the day to day of her job.

Samantha Power: I, you know, it's funny because I think the biggest thing that made a difference for, for me in how we approached this merger or what was happening is that we all had to move to the SEE offices because they were, I think probably more affordable or, or whatever the deal was. And that felt really strange is because for the most part the Vue structure was kept intact. I don't can't remember the exact deal of the merger, but most of the Vue editors kept their jobs and most of the SEE editors were let go. So in that way it sort of felt like we were keeping our, our mandate and structure intact, but having to work out of the SEE offices felt very strange because they're in such, they were in such a weird location and it felt very removed from what I would consider us to be reporting on. Like being downtown with accessibility to transit and being able just to get to locations. I mean you forget how important that is. And if you don't have that easy ability, then it puts it one more impediment in your way to actually getting to the story. So that felt really strange and working out of their offices in general just felt they were much more, they weren't the sort of like dingy cobbled together self-made structures that existed in the Vue offices. It was like a corporate office. It felt strange. It felt like a really great job, but it, you know, the pay wasn't great and you, you yourself don't have a lot of resources. So to be able to go out and actually report on things. So it was like, Oh my God, now I have to plan around this. Like yeah, it made a difference.

NARR: The merger altered more than just the newspapers mass head and its office location. There were external changes as well to try and redistribute the reach of two papers into one new entity. Doull increased Vue's circulation. Previously its weekly output had been



23,000 issues. While SEE had been printing 19,000. The new version of Vue was putting out 30,000 issues a week. But after all that, what was generally seen as a victory for Vue and this long fought alt newspaper war, ultimately rung hollow. Even with the new combined team doubts lingered on the peripheries as a new publisher also meant new focuses for the paper. In the years leading up to the merger Vue Weekly had been recording bands in the office. Studio editors were learning how to edit film and pushing out more and more digital content. After the merger, the push for developing those skills dried up. Doull doubled down on the print product itself. Keeping online focus on supporting the main product in duals interview with mediamag.ca the writer after Aftin Akins notes that online readers may notice some changes to the publication as Doull brought in a new development company in mid June. However, social media will not play a larger role. Then he quotes Doull and saying, 'we're in the business of newspaper publication. There's a lot of talk about newspapers disappearing, but there's a lot of people who still like to read them and we're doing better than we did last year. I don't see that we need to migrate the publication away from the print format. We'll support it with social media.' The turn away from online resources is something that stuck out from Mike Siek.

Mike Siek: So once the merger happened and there was just one paper still with too much overhead, still with too many people on payroll and still not enough advertising revenue coming in and it's a constant, that's a constant battle and so that I could see that in those years after the merger, as they moved into the new location and amalgamated all the staff together and work through that process, they still weren't able to make a go of it. It was relatively obvious. There was no more content being created, digital content being created, outside of the slideshow once in awhile. The fringe coverage was still pretty strong, but the the, again, the video content of that was relatively low compared to previous years, so we weren't keeping up with anything digital or online really. We were just like, let's make sure we can make a paper first.

NARR: And with that, the war between the weeklies was over, not with a bang, but with the soft lob of one crumpled ball of newsprint into the trashcan. As the surviving paper Vue had won the war that began with its creation, or did it? With high stress and low morale and all of the same financial troubles as before, Vue as far from taking a victory lap. As the new management shrugged at the ongoing changes in the digital landscape, the paper's relevance began to dwindle in the community and for advertisers. Frequent turnover of staff continued, but Vue would soldier on for seven more years.

NARR: Next time on A Tale of Two Weeklies.

Paul Blinov: Is it harder to keep a child alive or an alt weekly circa like 2013?

Ron Garth: The realization I guess that they, yeah, this is just not going to work out. It's tragic.



Samantha Power: We should be doing a better job of understanding what's happening in online reporting and self reporting and all of the citizen journalism that was happening, which is essentially what all weeklies were born from.

Trevor Schmidt: So to be honest, and it's going to sound callous, but I was not sad to see Vue go.

Mel Priestley: So it was a toxic workplace. And then there was the struggle between advertising and editorial just became so prominent.

Trent Wilkie: But there was people willing to pour their guts into it, to do it for very little money. They stopped caring about the writers. They stopped caring about the people who were making fuck all

Eden Munro: Life God a lot better the day I walked out of there.

NARR: A Tale of Two Weeklies is produced by Andrew Paul, Fawnd Mithrush, and Paul Blinov. Music is by Luke Thomson. Art work is by Michael Nunweiler. This series was made possible with product support from the Edmonton Heritage Council. Special thanks to Edmonton Community Foundation for use of their recording studio.