

Media changes

Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

Last week writer Chris Carlson and I were touring around north Idaho, and when we pulled in at Moscow decided to stop in at the local paper.

We pulled up to the downtown building that for half a century and more had housed the Daily News (or, as I knew it in my Moscow years, the Idahonian). I was a little startled to find it now occupied by an economic development company, but the receptionist there helpfully pointed me to the newspaper's new digs.

Those were located in a suite of offices on the second floor of the Moscow federal building. Chris and I inquired about the unusual situation of a newspaper whose landlord was the federal government, but that turned out not to be the case either. The federal building, which still includes the post office and federal courts, had earlier been sold to a foundation of the local hospital. Which presumably could kick them all out if it developed expansion plans in the area, as many hospitals in recent years have been known to do.

The newspaper, which had off-loaded its press years before and was using only a small part of the space in its old building, understandably wanted more cost-effective offices, and conditions were right at the federal building. But it seems a comedown to see a newspaper in an office building suite, like just another firm of accountants or lawyers.

This week also brought news of the anticipated sale of the Post Company in Idaho Falls, which operates that city's daily newspaper, the Post Register, and three eastern Idaho weeklies. The sale is said to be final at the beginning of next month. The sale leaves the Lewiston and Moscow papers, jointly owned at Lewiston, and the Hagadone papers based in Coeur d'Alene, as the lone locally-owned papers in the state.

The surprise buyer at Idaho Falls is Adams Publishing Group, an organization completely new to the Northwest. The most common expectation, probably, was that the Post Register would go to one of the big national chains like Gannett or McClatchy, but Adams is a smaller presence in the newspaper world. The Post Register may be the largest newspaper in its organization, which has 46 newspapers but mostly very small dailies, weeklies and specialty publications, and all of them located in the northeast, from Minnesota to Maryland. It seems a surprising connection.

The Post Register is among the diminishing numbers of papers that still have their own printing presses, and that may have been attractive to Adams, which does a substantial amount of commercial printing. Still, the Post Register-Adams linkup does seem a little unusual, partly because the Idaho paper is so far outside the company's geographic base.

Word from the Post Register is that little is expected to change, at least any time soon, at Idaho Falls: The paper should continue on generally as it has been. But once newspapers move from local ownership to the national or international marketplace, unpredictable things can happen. Over the years, for example, the Boise Idaho Statesman went from local ownership to Federated Newspapers, to Gannett, to Knight-Ridder and now to McClatchy. In large corporations, especially the largest, newspapers can be swapped around like trading cards.

Adams may be small enough that won't happen. But keep watch on this: See how this distant Idaho property is integrated into the moderate-sized business from the east, whether by more acquisitions out west or in some other way.

It's a new world for newspapers, and it just keeps getting newer.