

# CHRONICLE

## High noon in Amarillo

Few people in the Texas panhandle would say the *Amarillo Globe-News* is a journalistic gem. Its staff is fairly young, and most of its reporters are passing through Amarillo on the way to better jobs in places less dull and dusty than West Texas. The pay is not great, and there aren't all that many exciting stories.

So local business leaders drew some puzzled stares when they demanded an end to the "investigative attitude" at the *Globe-News*, the generic name for the morning *Daily News*, the evening *Globe-Times*, and the *Sunday News-Globe*. The papers rarely run high-impact series because reporters are too busy pounding out the daily diary of public meetings and traffic fatalities. But over the past couple of years the *Globe-News* has managed to report a few things that, in this land of boosterism, got folks riled.

Recent examples include series on racial unrest among Hispanics in nearby Hereford and on troubles at West Texas State University, including huge construction-cost overruns on a million-dollar mansion for the university president. Although no one has questioned the veracity of *Globe-News* reports, some citizens fear that "negative" news hinders the region's efforts toward economic diversification and away from the traditional oil-and-agriculture boom-and-bust.

So, with the backing of Amarillo's most prominent citizen, oilman and corporate raider T. Boone Pickens, Jr., a group called Panhandle Citizens for a Better Amarillo Newspaper launched a high-profile campaign last November to get the newspaper to change its tone or to convince *Globe-News* owner Billy Morris, of Augusta, Georgia, to sell. It was hinted at several meetings that advertisers not honoring the group's call for a boycott ran the risk of alienating Amarillo's business elite.

This was no ordinary citizens-group protest. It had a \$30,000 budget, a national organizer, and a staff that included employees on loan from Mesa Limited Partnership, Pickens's Amarillo company. "I Canceled!" bumper stickers, anti-newspaper buttons, and handbills circulated all over town. "The *Globe-News*," the handbills read, "injects unwarranted negative connotations into its stories, leaving the impression that 'something's rotten' in the Panhandle."

The citizens group staged an impassioned rally at the Amarillo Civic Center, where about 1,500 people waved American flags and sang the national anthem. The crowd included some *Globe-News* reporters; several were wearing buttons denouncing Pickens as the "Attila of Amarillo."

The roots of this battle trace back to a Mesa corporate Christmas party in 1986, at which

Pickens complained about the way his business takeovers were being covered. He was also angry over stories about West Texas State University, where he serves as chairman of the board of regents. Pickens asked some 400 employees to cancel their *Globe-News* subscriptions and begin reading *USA Today*, even promising to look into arranging for special home delivery.

Pickens is a very large fish for a pond as small as Amarillo (population: 160,000). His political action committees spend thousands, and he personally donates millions to charity. Mesa Limited Partnership is among the city's largest employers. Pickens bristles at the term "corporate raider" and he expects favorable treatment in the local press. He has an informal media blacklist that at various times has included *Forbes* magazine and syndicated business columnist Dan Dorfman, as well as the *Globe-News*.

So back in 1986, with a figure as important as Pickens openly attacking the Amarillo newspaper, owner Morris decided to jet in for a face-to-face talk. That meeting quickly degenerated into a heated argument, and only through the shuttle diplomacy of local cattle-feedlot owner Paul Engler did a truce emerge. Pickens called off his subscription-cancellation drive, and Engler says Morris told him that he would replace the *Globe-News*'s general manager, Jerry Huff, Jr., by the fall of 1987.

Huff was still in Amarillo last October when the *Globe-News* ran its eight-day string of articles on racial unrest in Hereford. The paper's reporters had spent six months in Hereford investigating a controversial roundup of local drug users (mostly marijuana) and a local criminal justice system dominated by a district attorney whose ethics have often been called into question. The series also looked at recent successes of Hispanic political candidates and examined a debate about where a new migrant-housing camp should be built. Racism in Hereford is hardly a new topic, and the town's white business establishment complained that the thirty-eight-article series was overblown and stale. (Critics noted that the drug bust had happened twenty-two months earlier.) Hereford's outraged white community asked Pickens for help, and the battle was on again.

This time the *Globe-News* faced criticism that couldn't be dismissed as the mere eccentricity of a local millionaire. Protesters included Hereford's mayor, an Amarillo city commissioner, members of Amarillo's chamber of commerce, and some members of the Amarillo family that had sold the *Globe-News* to Morris back in 1972. It also attracted people thirsty for revenge, includ-

Gaylon Wampler/Amarillo Globe-News



Henry Vargas/Amarillo Globe-News

**Press critics:** Some 1,500 people rallied against Amarillo's *Globe-News* after stories riled important citizens, including T. Boone Pickens, Jr. (above).

## CHRONICLE

ing some supporters of a ballet troupe that had received a bad review.

But the overstated flyers and strong-arm lobbying didn't win unanimous community support. Several observers noted that, ironically, the bland Morris Communications Corporation chain has often been criticized for being overtly pro-business. In Amarillo, the *Globe-News* has for years used chamber-of-commerce-style booster slogans to ornament its front page. The paper's senior staff has gone on trips to recruit new businesses and public projects. And the *Globe-News* runs a Monday "Business & Industrial Review" section in which merchants can buy ads that look like news stories.

The Amarillo chamber of commerce refused to endorse the advertising boycott, and its board chairman said the chamber "deeply resents" being asked to support either party. The ad boycott — targeting Tuesdays — lasted only one week, with most merchants simply switching their ads to other days.

And so both sides appeared to reach a compromise: the citizens group dropped its demand that the newspaper be sold to a local or regional buyer after the paper said it would appoint an ombudsman and a community advisory board; on the same day that the newspaper announced the changes, the *Globe-News* also disclosed that general manager Jerry Huff would be reassigned out of Amarillo, to a job coordinating political coverage for the twenty-newspaper Morris chain. Morris officials insist that Huff's departure had been in the works for months and wasn't part of any deal.

Some people in Amarillo think the personal friction between Pickens and Morris makes future conflict inevitable. A clue to Pickens's attitude might be found in a giant banner, yellow with black lettering, that suddenly appeared atop Mesa's headquarters building in December at the time of Huff's departure. "Good-bye Jerry," it said. It was raised by cranes.

The *Globe-News* building has a sign of its own, cut in stone above the entrance: "A newspaper may be forgiven for lack of wisdom but never for lack of courage." As long as Morris owns the paper, Pickens is around, and Amarillo strives to become a real city, that brave boast is likely to be put to the test.

*Terry FitzPatrick*

*Terry FitzPatrick is the news assignment editor for an Amarillo TV station. In the interest of full disclosure it should be noted that author FitzPatrick has occasionally made his way onto the list of reporters whom T. Boone Pickens won't talk to. In a recent incident at a public meeting — after Pickens had declined to answer a FitzPatrick question but FitzPatrick had stayed around to record Pickens's answers to another reporter's questions — the two engaged in a brief tug-of-war over FitzPatrick's tape recorder, which subsequently flew several feet across the room. The recorder, a Sony, survived.*