

## Amid clouds of change, “The Sun comes out every day”

After decades of working at The Baltimore Sun, newspapermen have adapted to survive in the Age of the Internet.

Fred Rasmussen rises every morning to write about the dead. At seven o'clock, he sets his brown fedora on top of the piles of files, books, and newspapers that cover his desk in the Baltimore Sun newsroom. A sign that reads “Mortuary Department” is propped up on the edge of his cubicle.

Rasmussen, an obituary writer at The Sun, started 44 years ago and has been with the newspaper through predictions of its own death. Threatened by the new challenges brought by the Internet over the last two decades, what was once the three Sun papers – The Baltimore Sun, The Evening Sun, and the Sunday Sun – has been consolidated into The Baltimore Sun, printed daily, and [baltimoresun.com](http://baltimoresun.com), continuously updated online.

Adapting to the digital age has meant major layoffs and sacrifices, but The Baltimore Sun has survived the transition, and the newspaper has remained a major part of daily life in Baltimore and Maryland.

The struggle has been experienced by every newspaper around the country, and as budgets continue to decrease and newsrooms shrink, reporters must work even harder to stand up to the challenges posed by fake news outlets.

Through it all, the fundamental work has not changed. Fred Rasmussen and his colleagues still spend each day gathering facts and writing stories on deadline.

An old-school newspaperman, Rasmussen stands out in the digital newsroom. He is a glimpse of The Sun's past: a bow tie is fastened around his neck and a gold watch on a chain sits in the pocket of his vest. His computer is buried underneath piles of notepads and books.

Since 1992, Rasmussen has handled one of the essential services of the 180-year-old newspaper: informing the public of the deaths of people from Baltimore. His obituaries are some of The Sun's most-read pieces, both online and in print.

Funeral homes send him notices of death, and he spends the rest of the day calling the deceased's family, friends, and coworkers, and digging through the paper's library. Some families feel uncomfortable talking about loved ones who have passed, but after decades of practice, Rasmussen has figured out the right questions to ask to get the answers he needs. And usually, he says, "People are happy that we want to write about their relatives."

His job is to figure out what defined a person. Was it their job? Their family? Volunteer work? He learns about where they grew up and went to school, what their nicknames were, how they dressed and how they talked. After a few hours of hard work at his desk, he has crafted the *mort de jour*: the death of the day.

After graduating from Boston's Emerson College in 1970, he worked at an advertising company in the city where, he jokes, he was the "World's Worst Salesman." In 1973, he heard about an opening in The Sun's library and moved to Baltimore for the job.

"I always liked the Sun," he says. The paper had a great reputation and his mother-in-law had worked there many years earlier.

As he learned the ins-and-outs of the library, Rasmussen also began writing freelance features for the paper. He learned from reporters and his editors, who taught him how to write a "punchy

lede,” newspaper slang for an introductory paragraph. One of his first stories, an obituary for Rye Whisky, was picked up by the Associated Press. In 1990, he was transferred out of the library and to the Carroll County Bureau for two years before returning to the Baltimore newsroom with the task of diversifying the obituary section.

Today, the obituaries in the Baltimore Sun tell the stories of a broad set of Baltimoreans, from Betty Jean Farace – a cook in local church rectories – to Jack Germond – a larger-than-life political reporter who worked for The Evening Sun. Rasmussen’s research for his work has put him in touch with celebrities and politicians such as John McCain, whom he spoke with following the death of Robert Timberg, Baltimore Sun reporter and author of *The Nightingale’s Song*, a book about McCain’s class at the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

“Every day is different because every life is different,” Rasmussen says. He swears that he will never be bored of his job.

Of course, writing obituaries is not what it was when he started 25 years ago. Hours in the paper’s library have been replaced by Google searches; and the team of 25 researchers that Rasmussen joined in 1973 has been reduced to one, librarian Paul McCardell.

Rasmussen remembers working with Walter McCardell, who was a photographer for The Sun for much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Now, he works closely with McCardell’s son, whom he calls, “the guy who can find anything.”

Paul McCardell, that invaluable sole researcher, spent so much time in the newsroom growing up that he likes to joke that he was born at The Sun. Since beginning work in the library in 1983, his job has been constantly changing. In 1991, the library began transitioning to an online format.

Now, almost everything is digitalized and only a skeleton of the former library remains.

“I feel like I time travel every day,” says McCardell.

An ancient card catalogue takes up one wall on the first floor of the library. It is packed with microfilm, bylines, and newspaper clippings. Against the adjacent wall is a dusty microfilm reader. File cabinets and shelves stacked with reference books, encyclopedias, and dictionaries fill the rest of the room. A framed front page of *The Evening Sun* from December 8, 1941 bares the headline “US DECLARES WAR” hangs on the wall next to a new addition to the area, a small room converted into a recording studio for podcasts. Untouched stacks and files of newspapers, magazines, and journals fill the second floor.

“We don’t need all this paper anymore,” says McCardell, gesturing to a stack of *New England Journals of Medicine*. The latest hard copy is from 2008.

Rasmussen and McCardell remember when a cloud of smoke hung over the newsroom cubicles. Brash language and booze in desk drawers characterized the environment where more than 400 people worked. The newsroom moved from the fifth to the second floor of the Calvert Street headquarters 17 years ago, and the unpredictable changes and uncertainty that the Internet would bring, followed.

The newsroom that Rasmussen described as “like being in the middle of a battlefield” is much quieter now. Reporters sit in gray cubicles with gray desks and file cabinets. The entire floor is covered by a gray carpet. The walls are white and decorated with framed front pages and photographs. Gray-green columns adorned with clocks and televisions reach from the floor to the ceiling intermittently around the large room.

Over the last twenty years, newspaper staffs all over the country have been reduced to bare-minimum numbers. The *Baltimore Sun* is no exception. Toward the back end of the room is an

ever-growing empty space as the shrinking staff consolidates. The recession in 2008 brought about even more layoffs and buy-outs, and where 400 journalists once worked, there are now just 200.

Every sheet cake at a “newsroom farewell” is just another reminder of the struggles faced by the newspaper.

Though the people there love their work, a stale fog of frustration hangs over the partially-empty newsroom; but with such a small staff, there is no time for sadness. Some of the writers reminisce about how they used to spend time together outside of work. They went out for drinks and helped each other with projects that were not their own. But now there is simply too much to do and not enough people to do it.

The buzz of reporters’ chatter mixes with the sound of phones ringing and fingers typing, but the newsroom is far from the wild scene shown in old films. Twitter is open on several of the desktop computers. Everyone has a smartphone in their hand or on their desk. In the Features department, a group works on a story about segregation in Maryland schools. Mostly, Sun reporters are out on the job, conducting interviews and writing about events happening in the city, as they have since the paper’s first printing.

Since the first issue was published by Arunah Shephardson Abell 180 years ago, the paper has remained a staple of the city, promising to provide “Light for All.” Though it was introduced into a competitive market in 1837, The Sun had collected 12,000 subscribers by the end of its first year of publication. The population of Baltimore was 90,000.

Just as the newsroom does today, Abell took advantage of every piece of technology to improve his paper's ability to spread news. He used the telegraph, steamboats, and even a team of carrier pigeons.

The paper continued to expand through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the first and second World Wars, sending correspondents to Europe and the Pacific. Sun bureaus dotted several states and countries. The paper grew to three with the introduction of The Sunday Sun in 1901 and The Evening Sun in 1910. The Evening Sun lasted until 1995.

The Baltimore Sun grew into the Baltimore Sun Media Group, which publishes several smaller Maryland-based newspapers and magazines such as The Towson Times and the Maryland Gazette. According to its website, the media group reaches 1.3 million Baltimore-area readers every week in print and online.

After 149 years of being family owned, The Sun was sold to Times Mirror Co. of Los Angeles in 1986. In 200, the Tribune Co. of Chicago purchased Times Mirror. Co and seven years later, business tycoon Sam Zell purchased the growing company.

The poor management that followed Zell's privatizing purchase in 2007 combined with the loss of advertising revenue and the recession, caused the Tribune Company to declare bankruptcy.

These challenges have brought about budget cuts and mass-buyouts for Sun employees, but the values of the paper remain the same and its readers are still dedicated to the daily news.

A 2011 report by the Audit Bureau of Circulations stated that The Sun was the 23<sup>rd</sup> most-read Sunday paper in the United States, both online and in print. Each Sunday, 343,552 copies were circulated and approximately 195,500 copies were distributed on weekdays. Currently, those numbers are down to only 253,333 on Sundays and 133,169 on weekdays. But the paper

continues to be a success online. In 2016, baltimoresun.com averaged 31.7 million page views and 5.6 million unique visitors each month, according to the Baltimore Sun Media Group's website.

Every day, reporters are sent out on assignments. After they finish their research and writing, their pieces go to copy editors and then to the paper's designer. The final deadline for print stories is 9:30 PM. Stories are inserted into an online template and sent to print production, which is in Port Covington. There, the papers are printed and bagged or bound and sent to vendors and homes around the state.

The technology and process have certainly changed since Abell was using carrier pigeons, but the basic service remains.

In the newsroom, editors are hard at work planning not only the next day's print paper, but also the articles that will go online in a few hours or a feature story for the Sunday paper. At 3PM, the team of editors gathers in a conference room for the third and final news meeting of the day. Seven section editors are joined by Sam Davis, the managing editor, and Trif Alatzas, the Editor in Chief. Each section shares its plans for their contributions for the next morning's paper and the website.

Eileen Canzian, senior editor for Metro News, has several stories in mind, including one about Kendall Missouri, a three-year-old girl who was shot in the leg and who is learning to walk again, and another about the wake for the late Cardinal William Keeler. Ron Fritz, Senior Sports Editor, has a story about Opening Day for the Orioles, which is just a couple of weeks away.

The team decides what to post on the website and when. At the end of the meeting, Jay Judge, Senior Visuals Editor, displays several images on a television screen and the editors choose what

photographs Baltimore Sun readers will see when they pick up their paper from the front steps the next morning.

Sam Davis adjourns the meeting and returns to his office on the other side of the newsroom. It is meticulously organized and tidy. A television showing Sean Spicer's most recent press conference sits muted on the dark wooden shelving across from his desk.

Last year, Davis became the first African-American to be named Managing Editor of The Sun. He began working there in 1980 as an Editorial Assistant in the Sports section when he was 20 years old. Over the course of almost 38 years, he has climbed the ranks and watched The Baltimore Sun morph into what it is today.

Davis grew up reading a print Baltimore Sun, and he treasures the way that papers inform readers, not only of big, "sexy" stories, but also of the important information that they may not know they need. But, he admits, "print slowly is becoming obsolete."

"We love our print product, but we can't ignore that the power of online is growing," he admits.

Working at a paper is not a simple 9-5 job. It does not shut down for holidays, hurricanes, or snow. To keep up with the 24/7 news cycle, Davis arrives at 9 every morning and often works a 12-hour day in the newsroom.

He remains on-call at home in case news breaks. His cellphone is the last thing he looks at every night and the first thing he reaches for in the morning.

Despite the challenging changes it has brought, Davis thinks the Internet has been a valuable tool for the paper. Feedback was harder to get in the world before tweets, comments, and shares dominated the Internet. Now response is quick and easy to give and receive.

Programs like Chartbeat track where readers spend the most time on The Sun's website and analyze which articles are most successful in generating responses. This information is used to help the editors decide what will go on the front page of the next morning's paper.

"We are constantly updating our website," says Davis. The website has to keep up with the constant news cycle that has become today's norm. Abell's print paper now produces videos, podcasts, and large collections of photographs.

Alison Knezevich, a reporter at The Sun who covers Baltimore County news, thinks that the paper is headed in the right direction. At 33, she is one of the newsroom's younger reporters.

"The changes have hurt the business side, but a lot of good things have come from it," she says. She likes that the internet has made the news and reporters much more accessible to the public. It is easier to connect with readers and form a relationship with her audience.

The Sun has over 260,000 followers on Twitter, and most of the writers in the newsroom have their own Twitter accounts as well. Knezevich has more than 2,500 followers of her own. Many of the older journalists in the newsroom have made forays onto Twitter, though some have been more successful than others. Rasmussen even tried out Twitter for a few weeks in 2012, though he gave up after only seven posts.

With use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, reporters can provide real-time news in short bulletins, as well as link to longer articles. Because of this, many maintain that Twitter needs to be embraced by journalists if newspapers are going to survive.

Knezevich wanted to be a reporter since she was little. Her father had the Philadelphia Inquirer and The New York Times delivered to the house every morning. When she graduated from college ten years ago, she was warned against joining the "dying industry" that was the

newspaper, but she went ahead. And though she likes reading print papers, she recognizes that she is a part of a generation that gets all of its news from the internet.

She does not think that it is sad that print is threatened, because she knows very few people who want print papers today anyway. She knows that news outlets such as The Sun will find a new way to reach the public. She is more frustrated by the loss of so many jobs, which makes it difficult to give local news the coverage it deserves. The fact that the newsroom is stretched so thin is just more of a reason that she feels responsible for providing the public with “verified, accurate, and unbiased information.”

She admits that she does not know a lot about the business side of the paper. But she does know that the revenue generated by online readers cannot compete with that which used to be generated by print advertisement.

It’s surprising to hear that. Advertisements are everywhere on the Baltimore Sun website, blinking on the side, in between paragraphs, and popping up each time you open a new article.

The paper started charging for online subscriptions as well. Readers can read a limited number of articles on baltimoresun.com each month before being prompted to pay for a monthly subscription for unlimited access. Subscription to the online edition alone costs \$2/week while a print subscription (which comes with a digital subscription) costs \$4.50/week.

Davis doesn’t know how much longer the print paper will continue to exist. Nobody does.

“We didn’t envision any of this,” says Rasmussen. When the internet first came to The Sun, no one thought that it would be as popular as it is. And no one knows what the next big thing will be or how it will affect the way news is spread. Journalists at The Sun are confident the paper will persevere, but it is hard to imagine the newsroom changing even more.

“The Sun used to be a destination paper,” Davis says.

It was the first newspaper and inspiration for so many Baltimore-born journalists, and its success has attracted writers, like Rasmussen, from around the country. The paper has earned 12 Pulitzer Prizes in the last 80 years.

And while readers read differently than they used to, The Baltimore Sun reaches more people today than ever before, continuing to service the people of Baltimore and beyond via daily papers, tablets, and cellphones. Though this new age of technology renders so much of what he once knew obsolete, that promise to help The Sun spread light remains to be what sends newsmen like Fred Rasmussen to work every morning.