Inter-County Co-op manager Doug Panek retires

Retirement reception at Leader office Thursday

Mary Stirrat | *Staff writer*

FREDERIC – When Frederic High School student Doug Panek took a part-time job sweeping floors at the Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association back in the 1960s, it never entered his mind that he would one day be manager.

At the end of June, however, Panek is retiring after 33 years at the helm of ICCPA, publisher of five Advertisers, the Inter-County Leader and the Washburn County Register, and home to strong commercial printing and web design departments.

Panek had a knack for math, and after graduating high school in 1967 he went on to get an accounting degree. For nine months he used that degree working at Gold Bond Stamp Company in the Twin Cities, now Carlson.

"I worked there nine months, and got drafted," said Panek. He served two years during the Vietnam War and, after a short time back at Gold Bond, returned to Frederic and to "the Leader," as many people know the ICCPA.

Between 1972, when he was hired at the Leader by manager Ed Greinke, and 1987, when he was asked to take that position himself, Panek worked all aspects of the business.

"Everyone did everything at that time," he said of those interim years. "No one was specialized."

He worked everything from inserting and tying newspapers and Advertisers to fixing computers in the middle of the night so that printing wouldn't be delayed.

During those years Panek saw major advances in technology that changed the printing process. The Leader's first computer system was installed, and the business moved from the west end of Main Street to its current location. For the first time, sales reached $2 million. The Leader celebrated 50 years as a cooperative and opened an office in Siren.

A new manager, Frank Gursky, had been named in 1982 and when he retired five years later, Panek applied for the position. He was selected as manager by the cooperative's board of directors.

Under Panek's watch the ICCPA has continued to take advantage of new technologies. Printing has gone completely digital, and the newspapers and company have a strong online presence through websites and social media.

"It's really been enjoyable to see how we've progressed through the years," he said. There have been three major additions to the physical plant, as well as numerous upgrades in equipment. The company acquired the Washburn County Register and opened an office in Shell Lake, thereby expanding to three counties. A scholarship program was established in 1989, annually providing dollars to graduating seniors in the eight school districts covered by the newspapers.

More than 100,000 Advertisers and 7,000 newspapers are printed each week, with hundreds more patrons accessing the news through the website and on social media.

Along with the many advantages of constantly changing technology, Panek has also seen a downside. Equipment and employees are more specialized, so it's harder for employees to fill in for one another. When equipment goes down, it is less likely to be fixable and more likely to need replacing.

More and more often people are turning to the internet for information, for news as well as events, sales and entertainment.

"It's been a real struggle," he said. "The whole newspaper business has changed." Coronavirus has made this more apparent, with more and more use of the internet and social media for updates.

However, he said, he will miss the daily routines, the challenges and his connection with both staff and the people in the area that he has been able to meet during his total of 50 years at the cooperative.

The company's many long-term and loyal employees have helped make success possible, he said, and the commitment of these employees as well as of board members have been key to the company's growth.
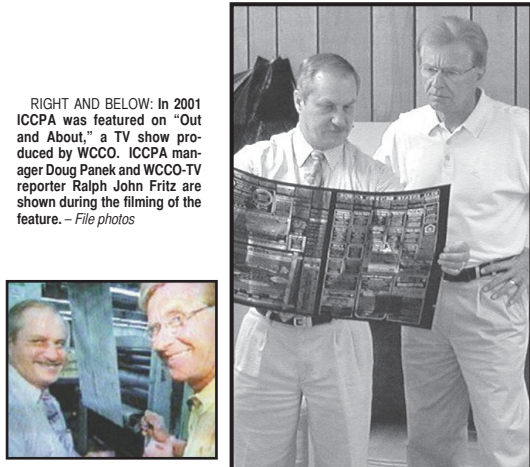
His philosophy, said Panek, has been to treat peo-

After a total of 50 years at Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association, the last 33 of which he served as manager, Doug Panek is retiring. – *Photo by Mary Stirrat*

Doug Panek, right, with former ICCPA managers Frank Gursky, left, and Ed Greinke at Greinke's retirement party in 1982. Gurskey was named manager in 1982, followed by Panek in 1987. – *File photo*

RIGHT AND BELOW: **In 2001 ICCPA was featured on "Out and About," a TV show produced by WCCO. ICCPA manager Doug Panek and WCCO-TV reporter Ralph John Fritz are shown during the filming of the feature.** – *File photos*

ple the way he would want to be treated.

He has appreciated the direction of past board Presidents Vivian Byl, Charlie Johnson and Ann Fawver, and current President Chuck Holicky, and the integrity and dedication of his managers. He estimated that he has attended at least 400 board meetings, and a much higher number of meetings with his managers.

"They all do a wonderful job," said Panek. "It has made my life so much easier. There are good days and bad days," he admitted, "but I've met some really great people here. I wouldn't have been here this long if I didn't enjoy it."

Panek turned 71 on Father's Day, June 21, which was also the summer solstice. Both he and his wife, Sharon, are in good health, he said, and want to spend some good years enjoying life. Together they have five children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

With 10 acres and a large pole shed with a workshop at home, he doesn't expect to be bored.

"I want to do some fishing and some golfing," he said. "I'm pretty lucky. God has been good to both Sharon and me."

Panek said he has a share of stock in the Inter-County Cooperative Publishing Association and plans to stay involved via annual meetings and board elections.

He also plans to continue reading the Leader and Register.

"Newspapers are great," he said. "I think they should always exist."

Reception

An open house reception in honor of Doug Panek will be held at the Inter-County Cooperative Printing Association office in Frederic from 2-4 p.m. this Thursday, June 25.

RIGHT: Doug **Panek as a young production manager in the 1970s.** - *Leader file photo*