

‘We were lucky to have him’

Former Freeman president Hillmer passes away at 91

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WAUKESHA — It seems every company has at least one person who is the go-to when it's crunch time, finding a way to solve problems or creating one when a solution isn't evident.

For more than 40 years, John Hillmer was that man at the Waukesha Freeman.

“He was just one of the nicest guys I've ever known. Whenever anything went wrong, John probably had something to do with making it work. He was just a man of all seasons,” said Jim Huston, former managing editor of *The Freeman*. “He was a guy who would figure out things.”

Hillmer, who started out in the press room and eventually rose to president over a 41-year career with the Waukesha Freeman, passed away Wednesday after a battle with cancer. He was 91.

Hillmer told a reporter in 2015 that he was hired over the phone on April 21, 1950, and he picked up the paper the next day to learn its employees in the International Typographical Union had gone on strike. He decided to head home to Austin, Minnesota, but dropped by *The Freeman* to say hello when editor Gib Koenig convinced him to stay, he said.

In a 2011 letter to a friend recapping his career, Hillmer said:

“The Freeman hired me as a composing printer, but within a month I was named composing room foreman. After seven years, I questioned if I wanted to stay at the Freeman all my life, for (there) seemed no place to go at this newspaper. A family owned newspaper where the publisher-owner was Mrs. Youmans — her husband had died in 1937. Running the newspaper for her was a general manager/managing editor, Gib Koenig who started working for the Freeman in 1925. The Youmans had three children. A son, Henry, who was six years older than I was the business manager. The other two children, both daughters, husbands worked at the Freeman. One was the advertising manager and the other was the circulation manager. I figured no room for me. I checked around for a possible position as a production manager and was interviewed for a job in New Haven, Connecticut, and offered the job.

“When I turned in my notice to the Business Manager, Henry Youmans, he couldn't believe I would leave the Freeman. He asked me why, and I



Submitted photo

The Freeman ran the world's first 3-D newspaper ad in June 1953. Here, press foreman John Hillmer is seen mounting plastic engravings on press plates for registration marks to align plates for printing the project as Freeman Advertising Director Hans Hamm, left, looks on.



Photo courtesy of the Hillmer family

John Hillmer and his wife, Beverly, right, meet President Gerald Ford at the White House during an Inland Daily Press Association conference in this undated photo.

said I wanted to move into a management position with a newspaper. He said why not here? Tell me what you want to do.' I wrote up a job description for a Production Personnel Manager position — something the Freeman needed. They gave me that job — it was in 1957.

“The Freeman had been growing rapidly during those seven years, and Waukesha County was the fastest growing county in Wisconsin with the Freeman's circulation growing right with it. What I was not aware at the time, nor was I told that the Publisher, Mrs. Youmans, was planning

to retire and remarry. Her son, Henry, would become publisher and they thought I could move into the Business Manager's position. In 1960, Mrs. Youmans retires and Henry became publisher. Mrs. Youmans died in 1964 at age 68.

See HILLMER, PAGE 6A

Hillmer

From Page 1A

"I was named Business and Personnel Manager in January, 1968, with Henry becoming Publisher and Chairman of the Board. That same year, Gib Koenig and I were both elected to the Board of Directors, the first non-family members to hold these positions."

He stayed with The Freeman through the transition to new ownership in 1991, before retiring the first time.

Hillmer wrote how he started to move The Freeman into the age of computers in the early 1960s, from the typesetting to eventually the bookkeeping, purchasing the paper's first business application computer, E-4000, from Burroughs Corporation in 1968.

Huston said he was trying to recall recently exactly all the titles Hillmer held at the paper.

"The publisher Henry Youmans at that time just relied on John for everything except news gathering and editing. ... The ad department operated on its own. There was the newsroom on one hand and everything else John was responsible on the other hand ... on the mechanical side and business side. ... That was the Freeman."

Huston recalled Hillmer was very active in his church, the Waukesha Bible Church, where he was one of its first and oldest living members, and even appeared in a production of "Amahl and the Night Visitors."

Huston recalled how he said Hillmer "laughed out raises, ... often surprising the recipients — "one of the reasons it was a good place to work."

Youmans' sister, Miriam Wellford, recalled Hillmer as a quiet, religious man.

"He was a very nice man, steady, loyal, hard worker, no question about that," she said. "He was more than an employee. He was just sort of part of the thing. Kinda cozy on him. Newsy Eddie. Nice guy. Don't come any nicer."

"We were lucky to have him," she said.

Hillmer's son, also named John, said his father "lived and breathed the newspaper." He said watching his father computerize the operations was fascinating and led him into a career in computer science.

He said his father grew up



Hillmer family photo

John Hillmer looks perplexed as he examines a computer circa 1968.

on a farm near the headwaters of the Mississippi on Little Falls, Minnesota, but moved to Austin in the same state, where he met his wife, Beverly. As such, outdoor pursuits like hunting and particularly fishing were a big part of his life.

"If it needed to be done it needed to be done and if needed to be all night, he worked all night. A solid work ethic," Hillmer said of his father. "This was a guy, if it needed to be done, he'd figure out how to do it. A handyman. He loved wood-working. Very much a perfectionist. It would take him forever to build a cabinet but it would be beautiful. We learned that while we were growing up. If you needed to do electrical ... plumbing or woodworking we did it, we learned how to do it."

When personal computers first came out, he bought one for himself at a cost of thousands in the 1980s to show Henry Youmans accounting could be done on a PC. He bought a copy of Lotus 1-2-3, bringing the manuals with him on a family fishing trip one summer to learn how to put the paper's accounting on it. He also was involved in the process of introducing color photos to the paper as well, Hillmer's son said.

After Hillmer retired from The Freeman, he worked in Sears' tool and paint department.

"He just really wanted to

teach people how to paint, what tools to use. It kept him entertained and it kept him busy," the younger Hillmer said. "He kept going until he was 78 years old before he really retired."

In retirement, Hillmer was a regular attendee at a monthly breakfast meeting of Freeman retirees at Denny's, and a voracious reader, consuming about a book a week and sharing their contents in detail with his family.

Former Sports Editor Lee Fensin, who worked at The Freeman for nearly 50 years, said Hillmer "interviewed him for his job at the paper."

"He wanted to do the interview at lunch and asked me what I liked to eat. I said a corned beef sandwich. So he took me to the old American Legion (now Eric's) while raving about their corned beef. Well, let's just say his taste in corned beef differed greatly from mine. I was used to Chicago deli corned beef. The American Legion sandwich was terrible, but I took the job anyway and for 50 years working at The Freeman, I found other things to eat at lunch," Fensin said in an email.

"He was business manager and was always looking to stay on budget. At a Freeman retirees breakfast he helped form, I reminded him of a former office manager, Roy Lieberman, who kept office supplies locked



Photo from Freeman archive at the Waukesha County Museum

John Hillmer explains the printing process to correspondents from around the county touring The Freeman in this Oct. 23, 1951, photo. Among them are Mrs. W. W. Vanderpool of Prospect (New Berlin), Mrs. Lucy Martin of Dousman, Mrs. Elizabeth Combs of Dousman, Dorothy Hartman of Brookfield and Lorraine Redfield of Pewaukee.



Hillmer family photo

Fishing was one of the pastimes John Hillmer enjoyed most, particularly on inland lakes in Wisconsin and Minnesota, his son John said.

in a vault. Reporters couldn't just grab a pencil or notebook — they had to ask Roy to get them from the vault for them. "The budget-conscious John's reaction to my story: 'I loved Roy' ..."

"He loved the band concerts at Cutler Park. One of his children arranged to have him get on the stage there to conduct the band for a song. He was very proud to show his fellow retirees those pictures. "While working at The

Freeman, I never got to know John well. I just knew that he was dedicated to making the business successful and was valued greatly by the Youmans family, which owned The Freeman at the time. Once the news of my retirement appeared in the newspaper, he was quick to contact me and invite me to join the weekly Freeman retiree group breakfast. Where I discovered what a nice man he was. And to his credit, he

didn't recommend I order a corned beef sandwich at Denny's."

Hillmer was preceded in death by his wife, Beverly. He is survived by children Susan (Dennis) Henriksen, John D. Hillmer (Bonnie), both of Waukesha, Sandy (Chip) Hungerford of Spring Creek, Pa., Penny (John) Quirk of Stevens Point, 12 grandchildren, and many great-grandchildren. Funeral services are pending.