

Century shutdown, Meth topped news stories in '09



By Jared Hunt

'SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED' - (top left) To say the February shutdown of the Century Aluminum's Ravenswood plant was a shock to the local economy in an understatement in the least. The full effects of the closure have yet to fully resonate through the local economy. The company's cutting of retiree benefits was a second blow to the community as outraged retirees (bottom left) gathered with Union reps to see what options remained. **YOU CAN'T HAVE ALLERGIES IN JACKSON COUNTY'** - (top right) That was the claim of Lawrence Wilfong as he was walking his 'perp walk' before gathered media after his arrest in July. Wilfong was among 51 people indicted in July's meth-related Grand Jury. (bottom right) Defendants answer indictments before Judge Thomas C. Evans, III.

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By Jared Hunt
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Jackson County, W.Va. -

Well, we made it. When the clock strikes midnight tonight, we'll close the book on the year that was 2009 and begin to pen a new chapter for 2010. This is my second year writing the annual "Year in Review" article for Jackson Newspapers and all I can think is, "What a difference a year can make!" Approaching this article last year, I had a wide variety of stories, both serious and entertaining, from which to pull and weave together a tapestry of 2008 highlights.

This year, however...well, 2009 was not so kind to Jackson County so far as news goes. Many a time I turned in a story list to Greg Matics thinking, "Man, this is depressing." It never feels good to be the bearer of bad news.

While there were several stories from which to choose, looking back, I can only see two stories that really sum up the theme of the past year: the closure of Century Aluminum and the indictment of 51 people on meth-related charges.

I'm sure you're thinking to yourself, "Well hey, there was more that happened last year than that!" and you would be right, but those two stories really embodied what happened in the county over the past year.

CENTURY SHUTS DOWN

As we closed 2008, the population of Jackson County was on pins and needles following the issuance of a WARN notice regarding the possible shutdown of operations at Century Aluminum's Ravenswood smelter.

The collapse of aluminum prices that occurred in 2008, coupled with high labor, legacy, and electricity costs were making the prospect of manufacturing aluminum less economically desirable for the corporate leaders at Century Aluminum.

Workers and concerned citizens were strung along as politicians and corporate and labor leaders pledged they would do "everything possible" to prevent a shutdown of the plant, however, those pledges were all for naught when Century finally proceeded with the shutdown in February. The economic impact on the local economy was both immediately felt and yet still continues to have ripple effects cropping up as time goes on.

According to a study conducted by the West Virginia University Bureau of Business and Economic Research in October 2008, Century Aluminum was responsible, both directly and indirectly, for 837 jobs and \$74.8 million in employee compensation in Jackson County alone. 667 of those jobs were a result of direct employment with the plant, with an additional 170 county jobs tied in indirectly. Statewide, Century was responsible for 1,577 jobs and \$110.8 million in compensation.

The effect of those job losses was illustrated recently when the WV Center on Budget and Policy released a study showing Jackson County had the fastest-growing unemployment rate in the past year.

To add further insult to injury, Century announced later this year through letters to many of its retirees informing them that they would be cut off from the company's health insurance and benefits.

In addition to Century's troubles, neighboring plant Alcan has laid off nearly 200 employees since the beginning of the year.

Looking forward, Century has said they will not reopen the plant until aluminum market conditions stabilize at profitable price levels and they negotiate long-term cost-effective contracts with labor and utility providers.

Aluminum prices rebounded with other commodity prices this year and will most likely rise into the future as the federal government's appetite for ever-increasing deficit spending continues to put further pressures on an already weakened U.S. Dollar.

The key stumbling block in the plant's reopening will be the cost of power, most of which is supplied by coal. With the EPA's recent, so-called 'War on Coal' in blocking new mining permits, this could provide upward pressures on power costs, creating an even greater stumbling block toward the plant's reopening.

METH, METH, METH

If you were to go by the number of page views (or comments) on our web site, there was one story, and only one story, that stood out above all others in the past year: the July round-up of 51 individuals on methamphetamine related charges following a special session of the Jackson County Grand Jury.

It was a rude awakening that July morning for several individuals who awoke to find members of Jackson County law enforcement standing over their beds in full protective gear and packing heavy ammunition with warrants to bring wanted individuals to the county courthouse.

Indictees were treated to the dreaded "perp walk" in front of gathered media cameras, many still in the jacksonnewspapers.com/.../Century-shu...

clothes they went to bed in the night before...and many apparently had no problem waiving their right to remain silent as they walked by reporters and open microphones.

"I guess you can't have allergies in Jackson County," one defendant yelled. Another launched a stream of obscenities so loud and long, it could have made even the most drunken sailor blush. (I guess that's what happens when you get arrested before coffee.)

This was also apparently the first story of the year in which people realized they could make comments on the Jackson Newspapers website. As the employee charged with moderating those comments, it soon became apparent that the task was futile as opinions came so fast and furious, we could no longer keep up.

Unfortunately, while the actions of law enforcement in rounding up the individuals was a swift process, the legal proceedings following the arrests have not been as swift.

Legal terms like specific discovery and nolle prosequi soon arose as the state was forced to dismiss some cases in order to both introduce new evidence and honor the due process rights of defendants.

To date, no one arrested in July's meth round-up has stood trial, through some pleas have been entered. Several are scheduled to stand trial in early 2010, however.

LOOKING AHEAD...

With 2009 being a particularly rough year, one can reasonably hope that 2010 will go much better. According to the government and business leaders, economic conditions are improving. Jackson County Development Authority Director Mark Whitley has reported there are some "very exciting" projects that could come to pass in the coming year.

Additionally, new Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Director Wes Harvey has been hard at work organizing the local business community and communicating their concerns with government leaders and is looking forward to continuing to revamp the chamber going into 2010.

As a community, we can do our best to walk in the hope that 2010 will be a blessed and exciting year for all.

*"Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
Man never Is, but always To be blest:
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come."*

**-Alexander Pope,
An Essay on Man, Epistle I, 1733**

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