



Border Belt Independent

A history in the newspaper business

- In 1938, my grandfather, Leslie Thompson, bought The (Whiteville N.C.) News Reporter.
- He was publisher when The News Reporter won the 1953 Pulitzer for public service in its fight against the Ku Klux Klan.
- My father Jim High was publisher for 60 years.
- I began my career at The News Reporter in 1984, first as a photographer, then reporter, editor and publisher.
- August 2021, we sold the paper to editor Justin Smith after our children set their own career paths, so we were still able to keep the paper in The News Reporter family.



We are all innovators

Newsrooms across the country are in a constant state of innovation, whether its the Charleston Post and Courier, the Chatham News + Record, The (Southern Pines) Pilot or the sole editor or reporter at a small weekly trying to figure out how to cover as many beats as possible. Innovation doesn't necessarily mean investments in technology.



Journalism under threat

“The state of journalism is widely and correctly, understood to be grim. About 2,200 local print newspapers have closed since 2005, and the number of newspaper journalists fell by more than half between 2008 and 2020. In many places where papers still exist, a lack of resources prevents them from reporting thoroughly on issues vital to community – issues like public safety, education and local politics.”

The Washington Post Magazine, Nov. 30, 2021

Border Belt Independent

Journalism serving the greater good of Bladen, Columbus, Robeson and Scotland Counties

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The Border Belt Independent is a nonprofit, online newsroom founded in April 2021 that reports on four rural, high-poverty counties in southeast North Carolina – Bladen, Columbus, Robeson and Scotland. The region has a large minority population, including a number of Native American communities.

The Border Belt Independent is funded for at least three years at \$165,000 annually by the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. We maintain editorial independent from funders.

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Bladen entrepreneur turns bankrupt property into destination with peacocks, wine and bourbon

There are two primary goals:

1. To publish in-depth stories to make people's lives better, especially those who struggle to get ahead in life, and to serve as a watchdog over government and elected officials.
2. To support the four local newspapers in the region by providing stories to them at no cost. Reporters at small newspapers typically don't have time to pursue investigative stories. We help provide that capacity.

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For example, the BBI collaborated this year with *The News Reporter* on a seven part-series to re-examine a 2017 series on the opioid crisis in Columbus County and to ask the question: what has changed, if anything?

Border Belt Editor Sarah Nagem recently published an extensive story about race and racism in Robeson County. Two documentaries commissioned by the BBI complement the story. The BBI is planning a community forum with the UNC Pembroke student newspaper to start a conversation about these challenges.

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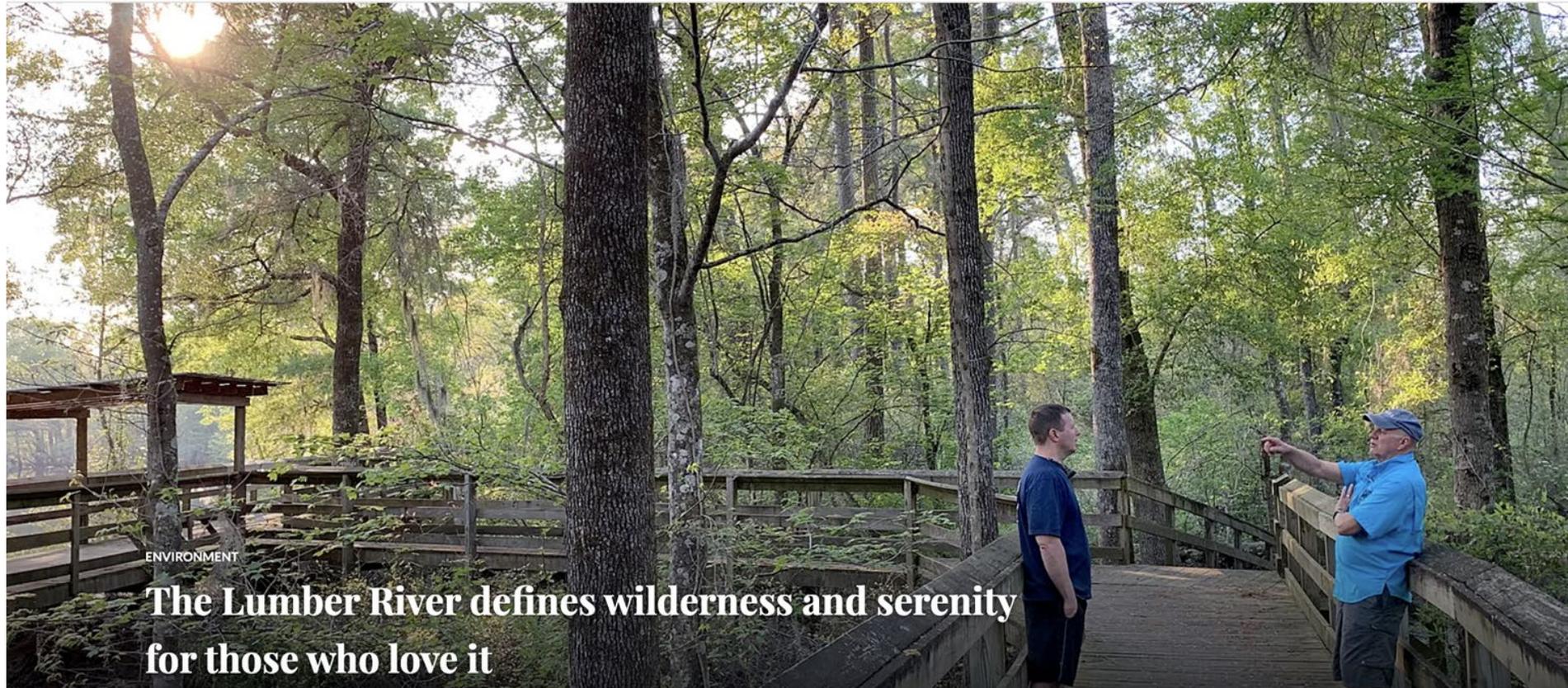
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The Border Belt Independent (borderbelt.org) has a weekly newsletter with links to our stories and those published by our partner newspapers. All content is free. Almost all Border Belt stories have been published by newspapers in the region.



Going in-depth on issues

- A profile of a 10-year-old Robeson County girl who was shot when someone fired multiple rounds into the car in which she was riding.
- The rising number of heroin deaths in Columbus County and a treatment facility for women only.
- A story about the police scandal in Chadbourn and how to town hopes to find a path forward.
- How the surge of Covid cases caused a tremendous strain on Bladen EMS workers. One EMT died from Covid just after the story ran.
- The work of Guardian ad item volunteers.
- How deputies shot and killed a mentally ill Robeson County man.
- The booming housing market in the region.
- A story about murdered and missing Indigenous women.
- A series about conservation along the Lumber River.

The BBI essentially serves as a news bureau for the four-county region. One unexpected benefit is that readers in these four counties now get to see and better understand the issues and challenges that affect them collectively.

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One goal is to have four reporters, one in each county, covering a variety of issues working in partnership with local papers to provide journalism readers can trust.

Our hope is that if we can make this experiment work in these four rural counties, perhaps we can replicate it in other areas of the state and country.

**Coach Ted Lasso,
possibly on the topic of
innovation**

***“Taking on a challenge
is a lot like riding a
horse. If you’re
comfortable while
you’re doing it, you’re
probably doing it
wrong.”***

