

FOR THE RECORD

A film by Heather Courtney



36 minutes // English // 2023

Website: fortherecorddocumentary.com | Social: @fortherecordfilm

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For The Record | LOGLINE & SYNOPSIS



LOGLINE

Running out of time and money, editor Laurie Ezzell Brown battles an oil bust, a global pandemic, and a growing mistrust of the media as she fights to keep her newspaper alive in rural Texas.

SYNOPSIS

In a small Texas Panhandle town, which has survived oil booms and busts, devastating wildfires, and a diminishing population, a few things have remained constant – cowboys, high school football, conservative voters, and the family-owned weekly newspaper The Canadian Record. Despite editor Laurie Brown’s liberal editorials in one of the most conservative counties in the country, The Record is loved and relied on by the community. But now, an already bad economy has been made much worse by the global pandemic – bad news for a paper that gets 90% of its revenue from advertising.

For The Record follows the life of Laurie, her town, and her newspaper, as she leads a valiant effort to keep it alive. “My parents started this paper in 1947. I don’t want to close the doors. But there have been weeks when I wasn’t sure we were gonna be able to keep going, when I was publishing a newspaper that was costing me more than I was making.”

With each day, The Canadian Record grows closer to being one of the 2200 newspapers in the U.S. that have closed since 2005. Out of the 3,000-plus U.S. counties, only half have a local print newspaper of any kind. Studies show that people who live in areas with poor local news coverage are less likely to vote. Social media often replaces the news vacuum, leading to a growing distrust of the news in general. “The fact that journalism is being denounced,” says Laurie, “and there’s no longer much value being placed on the truth, is just about the scariest thing I’ve ever seen.”

FOR THE RECORD | FILM PARTICIPANTS



Laurie Ezzell Brown is editor and publisher of *The Canadian Record*, an independent community weekly covering Hemphill County in the northeastern Texas Panhandle. *The Record* has been in publication since 1893, and has been owned and published by the Ezzell family since the late 1940s. During her 40-year career in journalism, Brown has served the Texas Press Association as President and Chairman of the Board, and in 2022, received TPA's Frank W. Mayborn Award for Community Leadership. In 2007, the Ezzell family received the Tom and Pat Gish Award for Courage, Integrity and Tenacity in Rural Journalism, given by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. Brown often says that the greatest honor she has received during her career is the trust and respect of her readers and fellow journalists.

Mary Smithee has been *The Canadian Record* business manager for the past 27 years, having previously worked in the food service industry. Her greatest, though far from her only, skill has proven to be her ability to collect payment for the rare past-due account from a customer while still managing to make them laugh, earning her the official subtitle of "comic relief." Despite having not grown up with printer's ink in her blood, Mary has become one of *The Record's* fiercest defenders and staunchest advocates—skills that have also proven essential to keeping the doors open.

Cathy Ricketts first worked at *The Canadian Record* as Laurie Ezzell Brown's childhood friend, and later as an adult, under the guidance of publishers Ben and Nan Ezzell. In 1998, she returned after Laurie's persistent pleading—on an annual basis—to come work with her. Her only training for the job was my love of reading and writing—and a lifetime of reading and appreciating *The Record*. She learned how to cover public meetings, edit, lay out pages, and assist in all facets of newspaper production—though she firmly opted out of editorial writing—and is generally considered the calm that quiets the storm. In 2020, Ricketts had to leave to care for my mother, but continued to cover hospital board meetings. Since the first of 2023, she has voluntarily assisted with *The Record's* transition from a weekly print publication to what, we are still not entirely sure.

FOR THE RECORD | DIRECTORS STATEMENT



When I first traveled to Canadian, Texas, in the far northern reaches of the Texas panhandle, back in 2017, I did not know what to expect. I certainly didn't expect the beautiful mesas that surround the town, nor the tidy picturesque main street with a beautiful old movie theater and a busy coffee house. Nor did I expect to feel instantly at home when I walked in the offices of The Record. These were my people - women in their 50s and 60s, who cared about journalism, and who cared about their community. It also helped that I am from a rural town myself (albeit a far northern rural town). I instantly felt like I belonged there.



My initial idea was to tell a story about rural America, through the eyes of its local paper. But as often happens with documentaries, you find your story as you're filming, and I soon realized that the story was the paper. How it was the center of the town, and gave the community its identity. How local journalism, and community newspapers in particular, are an endangered species, and that The Record

was a microcosm of what was happening all over the country, as I saw Laurie (The Record's editor/owner) struggling to keep her family's paper alive. Since 2005, more than 1 in 4 newspapers has closed in the U.S., and over 20% of Americans live in "news deserts," areas without any local news source.

I also saw how much the community relied on its newspaper, and trusted it, despite holding very different political views than its editor. And I saw how some community members still read Laurie's editorials even though they didn't agree with her, and would come in and talk to her about what they disagreed with her about. Much of that is due to how Laurie, even as she wrote editorials she

knew would not be popular, always started with some common ground, as she put it, and how she thought about how she “can move that slightly forward.” In a country that’s becoming increasingly divided, with towns fractured and polarized, that is no small feat.



This film is about the importance of local journalism, particularly local newspapers, and the effect it has on the community. But it's also about one woman's tireless effort to fight not only for her family's paper, but for local news everywhere, and to showcase the vital role local journalism plays in keeping communities engaged and united, and the truth alive. Laurie continues to inspire me, and I hope her story inspires you.



- Heather Courtney
August 8, 2023

FOR THE RECORD | THE FILM TEAM



HEATHER COURTNEY | DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Heather is an Emmy-winning filmmaker, and a Guggenheim, Sundance, and Fulbright fellow. Her film *WHERE SOLDIERS COME FROM* won an Emmy, an Independent Spirit Award, and a SXSW Jury Award. Her films have broadcast nationally on PBS, including *POV*, *Independent Lens* and *America ReFramed*, and streamed on Netflix and the Washington Post. She finished two films this past year – *FOR THE RECORD* premiered at the Big Sky Documentary Film Fest, and her ITVS- and Ford-funded feature documentary *BREAKING THE NEWS* premiered at Tribeca Film Festival. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and her 14-year-old rescue pit bull Meeps.



Paul Stekler | PRODUCER

Paul Stekler's documentaries about American politics and history have won multiple Emmys, Peabodys and du-Pont-Columbia Journalism awards and have all been aired nationally on PBS. His films include Sundance Special Jury Prize winner *George Wallace: Settin' the Woods on Fire*, *Vote for Me: Politics in America*, a two night national special directed and produced with Louie Alvarez and Andy Kolker, two of the *Eyes on the Prize* civil rights history series films, and three films aired on PBS's independent documentary series POV, *Last Man Standing: Politics Texas Style*, *Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics*, and *Getting Back to Abnormal*. He has a doctorate in American politics (Harvard '82), ran the University of Texas's film program for many years, his opinion pieces have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, and USA Today, and *Killing Custer*, a book he co-wrote with James Welch, was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.



Karen Skloss | EDITOR

Karen Skloss' films have been shown on HBO, in the MOMA, in wide theatrical release, and in film festivals internationally. Her work as an editor includes the acclaimed dramedy, "Support the Girls" (dir. Andrew Bujalski) which was listed as a top movie pick by former president Barack Obama. She began her career with the celebrated documentary, "Be Here to Love Me: The Story of Townes Van Zandt" (dir. Margaret Brown). Recently she co-produced and edited, "Have You Got It Yet?" (dir. Roddy Bogawa) about Pink Floyd's legendary Syd Barrett, to be theatrically released in the summer of 2023. She began her career in film as a child actor and made her narrative directorial debut with the psychedelic coming-of-age film, "The Honor Farm," which premiered at the SXSW Film Festival. "Sunshine," her first documentary feature as director, was nationally broadcast on PBS's Emmy Award-winning series, Independent Lens.



Karl Stieg | FINISHING EDITOR

Karl Stieg is an editor based in Long Beach, CA. Originally from Philadelphia, Stieg moved out to LA to study film at USC and has been working in non-fiction for 10 years. He has a special love for cinema vérité and using the craft of editing to place audiences into someone else's shoes.

FOR THE RECORD | CREDITS

Directed and Produced by
Heather Courtney

Produced by
Paul Stekler

Edited by
Karen Skloss
Heather Courtney

Finishing Editor
Karl Stieg

Original Music by
This Will Destroy You

Cinematography
Heather Courtney

Post Production Supervisor
Anna Ramirez

Digital Intermediate by Different By Design
Digital Intermediate Colorist - Brian Hutchings
Digital Intermediate Editor – Misha Aranyshv, Kerry Michelle O'Brien
Digital Intermediate Producers - Matt Radecki & Greg Lanese
Archival Conversions - Joe Bogdanovic
DI Assistant – Mike Werner

Post Production Sound Services Provided by
Different by Design
Re-Recording Mixer
David F. Van Slyke

Motion Graphics
Ryan Weibust -VFX/Titles

Trailer by
Blue Suitcase Productions

Poster Design
Yen Tan

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Austin Film Society

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Laurie Ezzell Brown
Mary Smithee
Cathy Ricketts

Also Appearing
Jaquita Adcock
Cheri Smith
Gabriel Freedom Brown
Kay Brown

The Canadian Fire Department
Dayla Cates
Jeanne Curtis
Jenny Wilburn Frazier
Eddie George
Alan Hale
Paula Kay Hargrove
Jim Hoobler
Ada Rex
Gail Waterfield
Sandy Waterfield
Colby Waters
Judy Wootton

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Alexander's Grocery and Deli
Brian and Corie Ash
Peyton Afill
Rebecca Beegle

Doug Benge
Steve Bognar
Clint Bowie
Judge George Briant
Brown Bag Roasters
Arthur Brown
Lily Brown
The Bucket
Andrew Bujalski
Canadian ISD Board
Canadian River Beach Club Calf Fry and BBQ Cook-Off
Kat Candler
Maryan Nagy Captan
Mridu Chandra
The Citadel
Roger Clark
Chris Evans
Kristin Feeley
Ellen Frankenstein
Megan Gilbride
Jeff Goodell
Jill Goodell
Spencer Hanes
David Hartstein
Hemphill County Commissioners Court
Kyle Henry
Holly Herrick
Jay Hodges
Andy Holloway
Terese Hunwick
Joe Jarosek
Caroline Karlen
Alison Kennedy
John Kerrigan
The Last Cowboy's Court
Nate Lee
Brad Lichtenstein
Andrew Luna
John McGarr
Robert Melton
Mesa View Senior Living
Robin Mitchell
Danielle Nice
Karen Olsson
The Palace Theater
Tresea Rankin
Garlon Rogers

Garret Savage
Janae Schafer
Leah Smith
Erica Deiparine Sugars
The Texas A&M Hemphill County Beef Cattle Conference
Shirley Thompson
Michael Townsend
Arlene Wadlow
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And the community of Canadian, Texas

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