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CenturyLink outages pose safety risks to residents, officials say

► 'I don't know what happens if someone tries to call 911, can't and dies in their home.' ► Broadband the solution?

BY BEN PETERS
Rappahannock News staff

Some Rappahannock County residents say that for years they have been forced to contend with unreliable service from telecommunications giant CenturyLink, with frequent and lengthy outages posing potentially dire health and safety issues in

areas where cell and broadband service is unpredictable at best, if not wholly unavailable.

Geneva Welch, who helps to care for her husband, former Rappahannock County Supervisor Roger Welch who is suffering from Parkinson's disease in their home located near Flint Hill, received landline and internet service through CenturyLink. But for

nearly three weeks in November, her connection unexpectedly failed, leaving them with few communication options during a time when her husband has had to recently make several 911 calls for emergency medical care. It was just one of many outages in recent months.

See **CENTURYLINK**, Page 8



Sarah Latham on the job in the 1960s.



IN APPRECIATION

Sarah Latham got the job done

Rappahannock News editor told the county's stories for decades

BY DAPHNE HUTCHINSON
Special to the Rappahannock News

Sarah Latham was a liberated woman. The long-time editor of the Rappahannock News, who died Nov. 24, 2021, would have chuckled to hear that term applied to herself. Likely she would have squeezed her lips tight, looked over her specs and shaken her head in disagreement. She never saw herself as a libber, a ground breaker or a trail blazer. But what better way to describe a woman with a high school diploma who became editor of the county's paper of record in 1956 and led the newspaper through the transition from manual Underwood to computer, from hot lead to digital type, and from tabloid to broadsheet as the county changed around her? At the same time, she was a magistrate for two decades and a founding member of the Amisville Fire Dept. who set records for fundraising. And she did it all as a single parent, widowed at 35 with four daughters, the youngest 8 months, the oldest 14 years.

See **LATHAM**, Page 12



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Peter Hornbostel's new short stories twist and surprise

The Flint Hill resident's book hops from past to present, jumps from Switzerland to Brazil to Rappahannock, and from heartbreak to happiness. 10



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LATHAM

From Page 1

In a quarter century at the helm of a weekly newspaper, she steered a slew of young reporters, budding technicians and summer interns to an understanding of what community journalism is all about. She gave them the basics of good writing and common sense, and she set an example of what “work ethic” means.

To stay on top of the news, Sarah kept a police scanner on at the news office in Washington and at home in Amissville. She was ready to dash to the courthouse to issue a warrant as magistrate or, as reporter, go to the scene of an event or accident at a moment’s notice. For years, in both places, the door was open to the state troopers and sheriff’s deputies on duty. They could listen to calls while taking a short rest stop and usually could count on getting a cup of hot coffee and maybe even a slice of pie.

On her 90th birthday, at a community gathering that drew over 200 friends, family, loved ones and well-wishers, Sarah allowed as how she had one goal still to reach. “I’d like to live to 100,” she said, tilting her head and smiling, a raised eyebrow leaving in doubt whether she was serious . . . or seriously joking. That was often the question with Sarah, who kept her wit and her wits about her well into her 90s.

She checked off that last item on her bucket list, celebrating her 100th birthday on May 21, 2021.

Sarah Elizabeth Cockerill was born in 1921, the middle child of seven. A working family on a 100-acre working farm near Herndon, the Cockerills were poor by suburban standards but Sarah counted herself rich in the ways that mattered, and she saw her childhood as busy with chores but magical with fun. Soon after graduation, she met and married A.C. Latham, and they settled in Amissville to run the Latham family’s general store. Coming to Rappahannock in 1940 as a bride, “I thought folks here were the nicest people I’d ever met,” Sarah recalled, and 71 years later, on her 90th birthday, she was still just as positive.

Sarah loved being the Amissville storekeeper — it was there she began to build her encyclopedic knowledge of Rappahannock people — but A.C. wasn’t as content, and she remembered him repeatedly threatening to whoop the next customer through the door with a grubbing hoe. So, before that could happen, they gave up the store for a garage where A.C. could deal with automotive issues instead of shoppers. Sarah learned to help overhaul engines, and she also drove the wrecker and began to amass her equally detailed knowledge of Rappahannock’s roads and addresses,

She joined the Amissville Fire Dept. Ladies Auxiliary when it was organized in 1952. In those early days, charter members took the “raise a little, build a little” approach. They’d scrape together money, buy cinder block, cement and other materials, and build until the money ran out, then they’d hold another round of cake walks, bake sales, shooting matches and

dances, then build some more. “Mom even directed a play, with salesman Ralph Rowzie playing the lead,” recalls daughter Sally. “And we had shooting matches behind Daddy’s garage.”

Then everything changed. On Aug. 1, 1956, A.C. Latham died in an auto accident. Sarah was left with four children, mortgages on house and garage and \$1,700 in life insurance. “When our world was rocked by Daddy’s death, she never let us see that, even though her world was turned completely upside down, too,” remembers daughter Nancy Hoadley. “She always seemed strong and unyielding in the face of adversity.”

Just four months earlier, Sarah had turned down a job as bookkeeper for the Rappahannock News. The job was still available and she took it. Soon named editor by owner Basil Burke, Sarah also sold advertising, wrote stories, collected community news, set type, took photographs and even bundled and delivered newspapers. But the one thing she wouldn’t do was play errand girl for the boss.

Burke would often show up with his elderly father on Wednesday, when Sarah and her crew were putting that week’s issue to bed, and on this particular night, his car broke down on the late drive home. He called Sarah with a demand that she rescue them but she refused, offering to send help instead. Subsequently, Burke stopped at the office, to complain about Sarah’s lack of cooperation, “I’m the owner of this newspaper, and I don’t even have a key to the office!”

“Well, now you do,” Sarah replied, handing him her key on her way out the door as she quit. Burke sold the Rappahannock News the following weekend in 1962, and by Monday, Sarah was rehired as editor by new owners Angus and Duff Green, who also owned and printed weeklies in Madison and Orange Counties.

Through changes in ownership, the Rappahannock News never lost its independence from politics. Sarah had no allegiance to a party. Her priorities were truth, doing the right thing, and giving her readers what



they needed to know plus what they wanted to know. No matter how tight the space, rarely was the decision made to hold the happenings collected by correspondents around the county (including her children Elizabeth and Susan). Who went where for Sunday dinner, who had family visiting, who was hospitalized, whose children made the dean’s list and whose children finished basic training — Sarah saw

those social bits as glue that helps hold a community together. As for “real” news, she never hid from controversy. “If you’re doing your job, you’re likely to make somebody mad. They’ll get over it,” she would assure her reporters.

She knew her subscribers. Back in the day when the paper’s circulation was independently audited, the masthead boasted circulation at over 100 percent of the number of county households. How could that be, Sarah was asked. “Well, we have families that get two, three, four copies. Some of them want their own paper, some want to read it first, some just don’t get along,” she explained. And she could name those families and identify the family matters that made multiple copies necessary.

She also knew her staff, supplementing the regulars with a rotation of high school columnists and young people working part-time as reporters, clerks, typesetters and press operators. “I credit Sarah for the love I still have today for all things newspaper — especially news writing,” said Cindy Cumins Pryor, who was both a Panther Tales reporter and a summer intern for the Rappahannock News. “She took a chance on me, gave me space to make mistakes and helped me uncover a talent or two. She will always be my favorite editor- ➔

Latham making the rounds selling advertising for the paper...





“Whatever it takes, you do it . . . Hard work and long hours won’t hurt you, and all I ever needed was a 15-minute soak in the tub before I was ready to face another day,” Latham said. “The job had to be done.”

Facing page: **Dorothy Davis, Sarah Latham, Emily Miller and Quita Parrish at the Culpeper train station in 1960 where the LBJ Victory Special (dubbed “The Cornpone Special” by reporters) had arrived. Latham went to Alexandria earlier in the morning so she could make the trip to Culpeper with Lyndon and “Lady Bird” Johnson, who were on a 5-day, 8-state, 3,500-mile campaign tour by train.**

Left: **Intrepid reporter Latham, on the job covering beekeepers.**

➔ in-chief,” added the former RCHS English teacher, who was back in Amissville for Sarah’s 90th birthday.

Sarah took seriously the responsibility of putting out the news. There was a week in December 1958 when she left for work Monday morning and didn’t return home until Thursday. Many nights she grabbed a few hours of sleep cushioned by cardboard boxes on the office’s cement floor; many mornings she dared icy, snowy roads to get to the job. “Whatever it takes, you do it . . . Hard work and long hours won’t hurt you, and all I ever needed was a 15-minute soak in the tub before I was ready to face another day,” she said in

an interview on her retirement in 1982. “The job had to be done, but I enjoyed every minute of it. You’re never doing exactly the same thing, and there’s a different challenge every week.”

While earning a living, Sarah also kept busy with homemaking and raising her family. She was a fabulous cook and her homemade bread, apple sauce, cookies, pies and cakes were sought after. She boxed up and delivered dozens of cookies to friends, neighbors and county workers at Christmas and was so young at heart that even her grandchildren’s contemporaries considered her their friend.

As a single parent, Sarah had some support to help her meet challenges. When she married A.C., she gained a lifelong friend in his sister Mary Miller Payne. Mary and her husband Red were ready stand-ins whether it was having the girls sleep over on the nights Sarah was late at the newspaper, helping get Nancy back and forth to college, or piling everyone in their car to go see the national Christmas tree in D.C. Sarah also depended on Alice Edwards as caretaker and nanny to watch over baby Susan until her older sisters came home from school.

At that 90th birthday celebration a decade ago, Aline Johnson of Sperryville, a regular target of Sarah’s raffle ticket sales for Amissville Fire and Rescue, had words that could serve as a benediction on a long life well lived: “It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes people like Sarah Latham to keep that village going. She has done more than her share for Rappahannock County.”



...And blowing snow at the ski slope near Washington in 1962.

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