

## El Diño

*Dean Singleton Storms Southern California*

By Michael Collins

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William Dean Singleton, 48, is an American journalist success story. A kid from a dirt-poor Texas family, Singleton set his steely blue eyes on becoming a part-time reporter at the age of 15, covering sports and local events in his hometown of Graham. He eventually dropped out of college, five years later, to become a copy editor at the *Dallas Morning News*. He soon set his sites higher. With a \$10,000 loan from the owner of a small Texas weekly and printing press, he bought the *Clarendon Press* in a tiny town in the Panhandle. Another loan helped him purchase another pint-sized Texas paper and by his mid-twenties he was ready for the big leagues.

Today, Singleton has amassed a media empire boasting 51 daily newspapers and 119 non-daily newspapers in thirteen states. His company, Denver-based MediaNews Group, founded in 1983, is the seventh largest newspaper company in the country and the nation's second-largest privately-held newspaper enterprise. While many regional readers wonder what the future will hold for the *Los Angeles Times*, now that it has been devoured by the *Chicago Tribune*, few realize that Dean Singleton has set his sites on Southern California, having taken control of over a dozen newspapers and local weeklies in the last few years. That would seem to be good news for the reader considering that Singleton's flagship paper, the *Denver Post*, has just won a Pulitzer Prize for 'breaking news' reporting. It would also seem like a Godsend to journalistic wags since Singleton has been praised for saving papers that were on the brink of extinction.

But those expectations fly in the face of reality contend Singleton's most vociferous critics -- his former and current employees. They contend that Singleton has gutted newspaper staffs, slashed salaries, eliminated benefits and pensions, and has broken nearly every journalistic ethic and moral in the book. He's been called "one of the sleaziest people... in the newspaper business," a "newspaper wrecker," a "ruthless union buster," a "flesh eater," and a "greedy bastard." Now that Singleton has snatched up the *Daily News*, *Long Beach Press Telegram*, *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, *San Bernardino County Sun*, and the *Pasadena Star-News* along with ten local weeklies, ink-drenched scribes are beginning to take notice: William Dean Singleton has come to town.

Nowhere has the adjustment to a Singleton acquisition been more painful in Southern California than at the *Long Beach Press Telegram*. The 103-year-old paper was sold to MediaNews by Knight-Ridder on December 17, 1997 for \$38.2 million. "It was basically a fire sale," said Gary North, the president of the Southern California Media Guild (formerly the Los Angeles Newspaper Guild founded in 1937) who was a staffer at the *Press Telegram* for ten years. "The Guild was basically shut out from bargaining because, even though we did attempt to do an employee stock ownership plan, Knight-Ridder stonewalled us up unto the last week. Well, you can't exactly put together a multi-

million dollar proposal in one week and not be shown the books and not be shown what you're bidding on. The fix was apparently in from the start because Singleton told us in the newsroom the day the sale was announced that he knew it was going to be for sale back in February. It wasn't put on the market until June. So where does that come from?"

What particularly galled North, now a production editor for *Daily Variety*, was the way Singleton took over the paper. In early November 1997, Tony Ridder, chairman and CEO of Knight-Ridder, introduced Singleton to the *Press Telegram* staff, which was leery of the takeover considering Singleton's reputation as a fierce cost-cutter. Staffer Sharon Stewart, then-president of the Guild, after several pointed questions, asked the media mogul if the organization had to worry about Christmas expenditures. "He also told us that we didn't have to worry about buying our Christmas gifts," said North who was at the announcement. "Of course, eight days before Christmas, 120 people lost their jobs, wages were slashed almost in half in many cases, people's vacations were wiped out, sick leave was eliminated as was bereavement leave. Then they started charging us more than non-union workers for health care and the list goes on."

MediaNews refused to recognize the 56-year-old Guild contract after it purchased the "assets" of the *Press Telegram* from Knight-Ridder, which didn't make the compact and the workers part of the sale, even though the contract said the pact "shall be inured and be binding on the successors and assigns of the publisher." The Guild subsequently filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board but that challenge failed since NLRB regulations don't explicitly refer to assets sales. Up to 200 workers had lost their jobs by Easter 1998 but many were hired back at greatly reduced salaries. Wages were cut on average in the *Press Telegram*'s newsroom between 21% and 36%, according to North. Some people's wages were cut up to 47% in other parts of the building along with several departments being completely wiped out. "The paper had the audacity to say that wages were cut on average only 4%. Well if you take everybody including all the people who got bonuses, the top editors who were paid to stay there by Knight Ridder and a handful of people who didn't get wage cuts -- they can justify the number. Say you take someone who is making \$100,000 a year and you take four people who are only making \$20,000 or \$30,000 and you average that, well of course you are going to come up with a lower number."

*Press Telegram* employees didn't take the cuts lying down. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, by a margin of nearly 81%, the Guild workers at the Long Beach paper voted to authorize a strike though no job-action has yet taken place. "To me, what is especially interesting is the people who voted to authorize the strike," commented North. "Many, if not most of them, are new-hires because a lot of the long-time people bailed, like myself, because our wages got slashed to smithereens. They just don't pay a living wage plus they eliminated entire departments." Natalie Shore, a former *Press Telegram* business reporter, agreed. "Do you really need to cut sick leave and vacations?" she said. "That was not about saving money. At a certain point, it was about trying to crush the union. There was another goal in mind and it wasn't just about saving money." Shore stated that MediaNews's draconian cost reduction strategies have earned Dean Singleton the nickname at the paper as "El Diño."

Singleton is no stranger to controversy and a hostile newsroom environment. He made his move into the big leagues, in the late '70s, by buying up the bankrupt *Fort Worth Press*. When he announced that the paper was truly dead 88 days later, he was pelted with beer cans by staffers. It wasn't the last time he shuttered a Lone Star state paper. In 1995, he closed down the *Houston Post*, making Houston the largest city in the country with just one daily newspaper.

In 1983, Singleton hooked up with Richard Scudder, an elderly gent with deep pockets. The two, who remain partners to this day, purchased over thirty papers in three years crowning their acquisitions with the procurement of the *Dallas Times Herald*. By the late eighties, Singleton moved into Northern California and formed the Alameda Newspaper Group (ANG) and, in 1992, took over the financially troubled African-American owned 119-year-old *Oakland Tribune*. The takeover was also an "assets sale" and 630 *Tribune* employees tasted the ax and were forced to reapply for 250 "new" jobs. 120 of the original crew were finally hired back. ANG wasn't finished: it subsequently gobbled up the *Contra Costa Times* and the *San Mateo Times*, along with a slew of other papers as Singleton turned his sites on the Southland.

Deeply engrained in Singleton's strategy is the concept of "clustering," the practice of buying up contiguous regional newspapers and pooling their resources to cut management, accounting and production functions. Clustering also allows MediaNews to maximize revenues through the cross selling of advertising through the adjacent markets served by the papers. But the process hasn't been smooth for the *Press Telegram*, according to a staffer who requested anonymity fearing El Diño's wrath. According to the staffer, even after more than two years, the paper is in total disarray with technical glitches plaguing what many call a college school of journalism atmosphere of immaturity. "We recently got a new computer system from the L.A. Newspaper Group and they integrated us into it and were completely unable to do it," the staffer said. "The thing crashed this morning, it crashed last night. It crashes almost everyday or so and we loose copy. We constantly have to keep reminding ourselves to save our copy and the one time we forget, the computer crashes. That's pretty ridiculous. We still don't have Internet access from our desks. We finally got in a few high-speed lines last week but before that we working with these 28.8 modems. It's really pretty bad stuff."

Not all of Singleton purchases have been without El Diño's supporters. Despite the fact that Singleton fired all full and part-time employees at the Massachusetts-based *Lowell Sun*, 380 in total, all but twenty were "rehired" and put on 90 day's probation. He dismissed the executive editor, Jonathan Kellogg, and cut health, sick-leave, and vacation perks while slashing the number of daily editions from five to three. Veteran *Sun* columnist, Paul Sullivan, who is also a popular WBZ Radio talk show host in Boston, begged to differ with the sour perception of Singleton.

"Anybody I talked to – I haven't heard anything negative," Sullivan said. "He bought a family paper in Lowell that has been in the same ownership for 102 years. The same family is still very much involved in the paper. We have been very autonomous... We

were bought by an owner that we'd see walking in the building, from time to time, patting us on the back telling us we were doing a good job, sending us notes because he reads our paper."

"To me, he's battling to keep papers alive in this country," Sullivan continued. "You are not going to like the surgeon that performs emergency surgery on you right afterwards but eventually, when you are still alive, that's the name of the game. I never met the guy before he bought the paper, but I will tell you that the people around here see someone who allows us to serve the community and he insists on it...every single person who did lose their job were people who should have lost their job. They were incapable."

Some vets agree. Jim Squires, former editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, knows Singleton quite well. The author of the 1994 tome "Read All About It - *The Corporate Takeover of America's newspapers*." (TK - what publishing company) Squires has noted Singleton's rise in the publishing world. "Dean Singleton is more of an entrepreneur than he is a journalist," Squires said. "He is a throwback, in many ways, to the old journalist-proprietors that used to be the main inhabitants of press ownership -- the old guys, because he is a non-public corporation. He is an individual who amasses newspapers and enjoys the game. He is not a journalist, per se, like many of the old journalistic-proprietors were but he is a guy who likes the newspaper game and tries to keep papers alive. In fact, that's his great contribution. Dean Singleton saves newspapers from extinction.... It's usually, in Dean's case, a choice between a bare bones type of newspaper, in terms of cost and journalistic experience, or no newspaper at all."

Singleton maintained that criticism of his takeover tactics are the work of disgruntled ex-employees. The media magnate has characterized these malcontents to *Eightball* as "editorial hacks of old." (see Sidebar) The *Press Telegram* staffer interviewed for this article begs to disagree. "There is a real pronounced feeling that we are just an outpost of the *Daily News*, that they don't take us seriously," he said. "We used to report to (Knight Ridder in) Miami and we thought that was bad enough. But the *Miami Herald* was a paper that had won the Pulitzer Prize and it was a flagship paper and it was something. But now we are taking orders from Covina and Woodland Hills and the *Daily News*."

Dean Singleton is here to stay on the Southern California scene and is unrepentant. He has reportedly said, in 1995, that, "if I had my choice between pleasing one banker or 1,000 journalists, I'd rather please the banker." He added that "investigative reporting turns off readers; it's not a popular thing to do anymore."

This sort of brash talk has angered local journalists who are nevertheless resigned to dealing with Singleton. "I'm not saying that we don't want to work with these people -- we want them to prosper but we want them to change, to see the error of their ways from the humanistic and community standpoints because they are setting themselves up as moral leaders of the community by editorializing, picking and choosing what the people know about the communities in which they basically have a daily monopoly of information," said North. "They have a moral and ethical responsibility to tell the truth, to use full disclosure and to not mislead the community. Thus far they are not doing that in

many cases in regards to what's happening in their own house. We want them to correct that and we want them to apply journalistic standards and integrity to their own coverage of their own newspaper much as the LA Times has had to painfully go through recently. They are not doing that. At the same time, if you are going to editorialize about what's right for the community, and you are going to supposedly be a community leader into the brave new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, then you need to set the example of how to treat workers, the humane and enlightened way to treat the workers.”

William Dean Singleton is certainly not going away in the Southern California journalistic scene. What writers and support staff can do about it remains to be seen.