

News Hole

The Merc and the Chron fail to deliver on promises to provide mid-peninsula coverage after the demise of the local daily **By Hal Plotkin**

IT WAS THE KIND of story some media outlets really love. An illegal and deadly black mamba snake was reportedly on the loose in Palo Alto. Locked in a bitter struggle to woo the 40,000 subscribers who were jilted when the Chicago Tribune shut down the *Peninsula Times Tribune* six months earlier, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Jose Mercury News* took turns terrorizing their targeted readers on the mid-peninsula.

Over the course of a mere three weeks, more than a dozen news reports regurgitated the thin story: how an anonymous tipster who "sounded sincere" had left a message with city authorities, how small children might not be safe in their front yards, and what to do, pray tell, if the deadly viper decided to nibble on members of your family.

For the dailies, the story was perfect. Residents who worried about their loved ones' safety sim-

ply had no choice: They would have to take a local daily to avoid becoming snake chow. Better yet, since the mamba yarn focused on mainstream journalism's stock and trade—an entirely mythical danger—the attention-grabbing story was unlikely to offend any powerful local advertisers, which no doubt pleased the dailies' bean counters.

Shortly after the death of the *Peninsula Times Tribune* in March 1993, senior executives at both the *Merc* and the *Chron* promised that their papers would devote considerable space and attention to mid-peninsula news.

It's a promise they haven't kept. For residents who hoped that the blanket mamba coverage would be a harbinger of things to come, the incident instead proved to be the high-water mark of mid-peninsula news in the local dailies.

At the peak of the circulation skirmish, during the fall 1993 mamba incident, the *Merc* averaged three to four stories a day focusing on the communities of Palo Alto, Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Mountain View and Menlo Park. Meanwhile, the *Chron* did almost as well during the early days of the local news ink wars, averaging between two to three stories a day.

Since then, however, mid-peninsula coverage in both the *Chronicle* and the *Mercury News* has dwindled to a mere trickle. North county readers

Continued on next page