

are now lucky if they can find a single story in either the *Merc* or the *Chron* about doings in or around their town. In fact, if the mamba showed up today and bit the local police chief on the butt, the snake probably would have to hire a publicist to spread the news.

IN THE DAYS immediately following the demise of the *Peninsula Times Tribune*, where annual losses were estimated to have reached \$3.2 million, representatives of the region's two major metropolitan dailies played the role of oversolicitous suitors.

Then *Merc* publisher Larry Jinks and editors Rob Elder and Bob Ingle even took turns handing out free copies of their afternoon edition to startled passersby in downtown Palo Alto, pledging in an open letter to the community that they were "ready to listen to downtown Palo Alto." A 96-page *Merc* tabloid, *Peninsula Living*, debuted and the *Merc* triumphantly latched on to former *Trib* columnist Loretta Green.

Not to be outdone, the *Chron* nabbed *Tribune* reporters Carlyne Zinko and John Woolfolk on part-time contracts, and a few weeks later nailed down a deal with veteran peninsula scribe Mark Simon.

Two years later, however, the *Merc's* afternoon edition is dead and its weekly *Peninsula Living* section has shrunk by two-thirds. The *Chron*, meanwhile, now on the newspaper industry's version of emergency life support, terminated arrangements with Zinko and Woolfolk shortly after settling a nasty labor strike earlier this year. While both Zinko and Woolfolk have since secured other duties with the Knight-Ridder operation, the *Chron* itself seems headed for a *Peninsula Times Tribune*-like fate; it recently "consolidated" two of its sections into one, even moving the venerable Herb Caen to a back page.

"I thought this community could and would support a daily newspaper," says former *Tribune* editor Leonard Koppett. Two years ago, Koppett confidently predicted that the vacuum created by the paper's departure would quickly suck someone into the market despite the costs associated with launching a new daily newspaper.

"Ten million dollars, \$20 million, \$30 million—those are just numbers," Koppett says. "What we're talking about is one of the

most highly educated and highest income communities anywhere in the country. I thought someone would step forward and start a daily newspaper.

"Obviously," he adds, "I was wrong."

I THINK THAT WHAT IS happening is that people in this area are looking elsewhere for their information," offers former *Tribune* assistant editorial page editor Mike McDevitt. "Yes, this is one of the most literate places in the country, but it means they are busy reading other things, specialized newspapers, trade publications, the Internet.

"It's a pretty sad state of affairs for young newspaper reporters," the 35-year-old McDevitt, now a grad student at Stanford, notes. "What I can tell you," he quickly adds, "is that as a former reporter, I see stories almost every day that should be reported on, particularly here at Stanford and in East Palo Alto, that aren't getting the attention they deserve."

Perhaps more deleterious is the effect this news vacuum may have on participation in local government. "What I see happening is that people don't know what is going on at City Hall anymore," says former three-term Palo Alto City Council member Emily Renzel. When, for example, the council met recently to go over a wide-ranging proposed revision to the city's comprehensive plan that longtime environmentalist Renzel says would increase traffic and congestion, only nine people showed up.

"Just nine! Can you believe that? And four of them were associated with Stanford's public relations office," Renzel says, noting that the university is pushing the revisions with hopes of expanding its lucrative shopping center.

"That's scary," Renzel says, adding that when she served on the council during the late '70s and '80s, "the place would have been packed. People knew what was going on then. It seems like nobody is paying any attention at all now."

THE *Palo Alto Weekly*, which helped pave the way for the *Tribune's* decline and ultimate fall, is now published twice a week and has increased its coverage of municipal affairs somewhat, although its establishmentarian leanings leave community activists like Renzel troubled.