

Ryerson Index Inc

President's Report

Presented to the AGM on 13 November 2020

Welcome everyone to our twelfth AGM as an incorporated organisation. This year will go down in the annals as the year which has seen the most change to Ryerson in our 22-year history.

In no particular order, we have seen

- Covid-19 being the catalyst for the closure of more newspapers in a short period of time than has ever happened before in Australia
- The change of the Ryerson indexing methodology to embrace digital-only newspapers
- The inclusion in Ryerson of funeral notices published only on a funeral director's website

Each of these events has overlapped the traditional 30 June end-of-year reporting cutoff, but all are of such importance to Ryerson that I have included post-EOY comments where appropriate.

I'll now look at each point in more detail.

Newspaper Closures

The two major publishers, NewsCorp and ACM, took different approaches to the problems caused by the huge reduction in revenue as Covid-19 shut off the classifieds income stream.

NewsCorp was upfront about what they were doing, announcing well before the event which papers would close completely, and which would convert from print, or print and digital, to digital-only. This was of major benefit to Ryerson, and made the transition quite easy.

ACM, on the other hand, was extremely secretive about their plans for individual papers. Many were "suspended" in March, with the corporate story being this was only until the end of the financial year, and they would re-appear in print come July. Not so, as it turned out. Less than half the suspended papers returned to print in July, and even then some which did return were suspended again in August. Many still remain suspended (in November) with no definite resumption date. Phone calls to the suspended papers (and there have been many) only elicit the corporate response "the paper remains suspended, with no scheduled resumption". I suspect many of these papers will never again appear in print.

Indexing Digital Newspapers

Again, Ryerson has adopted a two-pronged approach. For those NewsCorp papers which went to digital-only, we took the view that we should save each notice from the NewsCorp digital archive, on the basis that there is no guarantee that they will remain forever available online. It is quite possible that, years hence, Ryerson will have the only surviving copy of some of these notices. We were helped considerably in this by NewsCorp, who adopted our suggestion that a “digital-only” filter option should be added to the selection process. This makes the saving of all digital-only notices each day very simple.

ACM, on the other hand, managed to break their own database of archived notices by pulling out of the hosting deal with legacy.com. On top of this, we have no idea which ACM papers are digital-only, and will remain digital-only. At this stage, we are not actively saving ACM digital notices, and this will remain the case until the situation becomes clearer.

Indexing from Funeral Directors’ websites

With the closure of many papers, we started looking at notices archived on a few country funeral directors’ websites, and comparing them to those published in the local paper for that area. We were surprised to find a large number of notices present on the websites which had never appeared in print. The reason for this is not known, but my suspicion is that it all comes down to cost – if the funeral director gives the client the option of paying \$xxx to have a notice in the local paper, it is not surprising when a client declines.

Our next step therefore was to look at funeral directors in areas where papers had been discontinued, and treat notices on their websites as digital-only – ie, we saved the notice in the RNR for future reference, and indexed it using the funeral director’s name as the “publisher”. This has materially increased the number of notices now going into Ryerson each week.

General Comments

As a result of these initiatives, the Ryerson of today is a very different beast to the Ryerson of a year ago – but we believe that the differences are all positive, in that we now have a much superior product. As an example of how recent initiatives have improved Ryerson, we now have more than 100,000 entries containing birth details – and almost all of these detail births within the past 100 years, which are unobtainable from the state BDM indexes.

This year we added 422,135 records to Ryerson, a lower number than we have had for some years, due mainly to the loss of notices in the 4th quarter as publications reduced, combined with the steadily-declining trend in the number of notices published.

The new v7 of the Ryerson indexer was introduced during the year, and has certainly made life easier for both the indexers and myself.

Our corporate sponsorship list has fortunately remained stable for 2020. We have had one further approach (from the University of Adelaide Alumni Office) since the end of the financial year, which has since been converted into a paying client. We are most grateful to our continuing sponsors for their support. Their financial contributions are an important part of our annual budget.

Bob Atkins continued to represent Ryerson at events in Sydney and surrounds (when they used to be held!), but such activity has completely stopped since the end of 2019, and in all probability will not resume in the format we had in the past. As an example, the 2020 NSW State Conference was cancelled, and the planned 2021 NSW State Conference will not include the Friday FH Fair, with the conference being limited to a single day, and with considerable use of video presentations. Thus, the scope we had for promoting Ryerson by our presence at events will not be available for some time, and we will most likely have to look at alternative means of getting our brand out there.

Our website continues to be one of the most reliable in the genealogical world, thanks to Rob McDonnell's continued oversight. During the past year we had no recorded outages, a situation almost unheard of in the IT world. Our Facebook page has now passed 5,000 Likes.

Our financial position continues to be very sound, as shown by the previously-circulated Treasurer's report. I will leave Therese to answer any questions on that report.

Our project to catch up with the SMH Funeral Notices (which were left unindexed on our original pass through the SMH) continues, as it will for some time yet, with Robyn Golby, Roy Vickers and Kathy Conroy making inroads into the missing notices.

Some Appreciations

The excellent committee overseeing Ryerson deserves a huge vote of thanks for keeping everything running smoothly during such a difficult period. All current Committee members have nominated for re-election.

But even more than the Committee, I believe our indexers are the unsung heroes of the past year. They have all handled every obstacle put in their way in our most challenging year ever, and haven't missed a beat. The uptake of saving and indexing digital notices, and Funeral Director notices, was absolutely brilliant.

So, on behalf of the Committee, I thank all of you involved in any way with Ryerson, and I look forward to another successful, and hopefully less challenging, year.

John Graham
President

Appendix A – Year-on-Year Figures

Looking at the figures for the number of records indexed over the past few years, we have:

Date	Records	Increase
30-Jun-08	1,750,286	
30-Jun-09	2,091,363	341,077
30-Jun-10	2,503,696	412,333
30-Jun-11	3,066,875	563,179
30-Jun-12	3,559,727	492,852
30-Jun-13	3,990,376	430,649
30-Jun-14	4,500,200	509,824
30-Jun-15	5,033,716	533,516
30-Jun-16	5,563,788	530,062
30-Jun-17	6,133,046	569,258
30-Jun-18	6,610,628	486,966
30-Jun-19	7,077,033	466,405
30-Jun-20	7,499,168	422,135