

40 Years Of Road Journalism

'South Dakota Magazine' Continues To Offer Timeless Stories

By David Lias For The Plain Talk Jul 3, 2026

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Katie Hunhoff was a Yankton first grader when she held the very first edition of "South Dakota Magazine" in her hands.

Today, she's the magazine's publisher and she and the magazine's editor, John Andrews, addressed the **Vermillion Rotary Club** at its June 17 luncheon meeting to talk about why 2025 was a particularly special year for the publication and how the celebration of quality work is continuing.

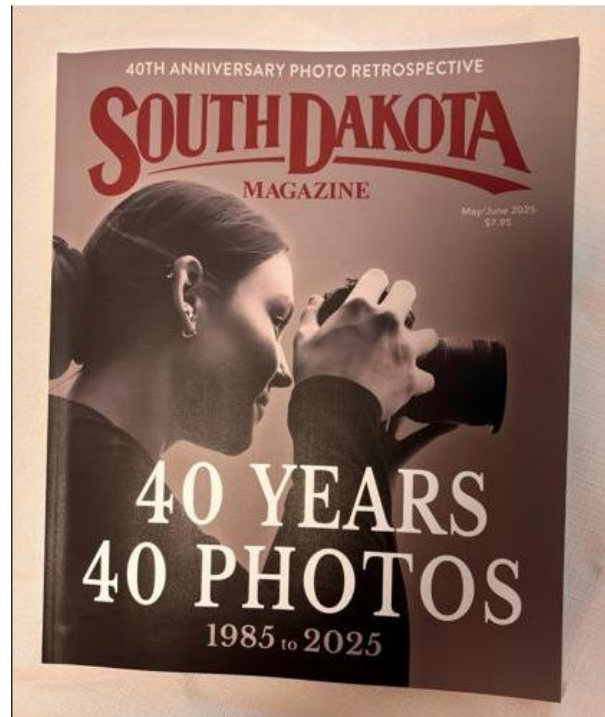
Katie and John have been part of the magazine's staff for nearly 20 years. The publication got its start 20 years earlier, in 1985, by Katie's father, Bernie Hunhoff.

Today, Bernie Hunhoff serves as the magazine's editor-at-large.

"We're here, well, because we love talking about the magazine, but also because we're celebrating our 40th anniversary of the magazine," Katie Hunhoff said. "My parents started the magazine in 1985 in Yankton, and we've grown to be the largest paid publication in the state of South Dakota and we're really proud of that.

"John and I wanted to come in and talk to you ... about what we do with the magazine and why we think it's important," she said. "We like to describe what we do as road journalism. We don't sit behind a desk and write about South Dakota from a distance. We get in the car, we drive back down the roads, we sit at kitchen tables and tailgates and listen to people tell us what their corner of the state means to them and that's where our stories come from."

Katie Hunhoff said she was asked earlier by a Rotarian where the staff of South Dakota Magazine gets its story ideas.



"We do come up with some of them, but all of our best ideas really come from the readers and once we go out and start interviewing people and start getting on the road, that's when we get even more story ideas come to us, too," she said.

She then read an excerpt from a story she wrote approximately two years ago "because next we're going to talk about why we think our work matters and why these stories matter to South Dakotans."

The story is entitled "Running With Billy," about South Dakotan Olympian Billy Mills. It was inspired by a session Katie attended at the South Dakota Festival of Books in Brookings.

"Billy Mills began the last lap at the Tokyo Olympics. He knew low blood sugar was draining his energy. His vision was cloudy.

He tried to focus his eyes forward on Australian Ron Clark, the world record holder and a clear favorite. Then he saw Clark turning to look at him. Maybe he's getting worried, thought Mills.

With just 400 feet remaining in the 10,000-meter race, Mills felt a sudden burst of energy. He moved to the outside and started running as strongly as if a starting gun had just sounded. He rocketed past Clark and exploded through the finish line.

Of course, I wasn't there for Mills' victory in 1964, but I was watching in September when he showed a film of his legendary race at the South Dakota Festival of Books. As Mills crossed the finish line and celebrated, I felt my heart expanding my chest and tears came to my eyes. Later, Mills told us that when he felt that burst of energy, he clearly remembered seeing an eagle insignia on a German competitor's singlet as he passed him.

The vision reminded him suddenly of his childhood on Pine Ridge, and he recalled his father telling him he had the wings of an eagle. After the race, Mills found the German competitor, but there was no eagle insignia on his tracksuit. The imagined eagle had guided the South Dakotan to a victory that is still considered one of the biggest upsets in Olympic history.

After Mills' speech was over, my friends and I walked out into the bright autumn sunlight. I was still feeling a high after watching the win. I felt like I was right there winning the gold medal alongside him.

I laughed with my friends. My friends laughed with me. They, too, felt like they had won the gold medal.

If Billy Mills can make a slow runner like me feel like an Olympic medalist, it's a strong testament to the power of stories. Here at 'South Dakota Magazine,' we learned long ago that stories have power, and they unite us in beautiful ways."

This excerpt, Katie Hunhoff said, serves as an example of how South Dakota Magazine gathers stories on the road. It also highlights why the magazine staff believes telling these stories is important.

"One really important thing that we think the stories do is give people a sense of place and a sense of pride in their place. We overwhelmingly feel this," she said, "and I think as Rotarians, we understand that. If we can make people have pride in their place, care about where they live, in turn, we think that they will take better care of their own."

Andrews, the managing editor, grew up in Lake Norden, received a bachelor's degree in journalism at South Dakota State University and a master's degree in history at the University of South Dakota.

"I've been at the magazine now since 2007, so I'm coming up on 19 years. I've written and edited and proofread a lot of stories, but probably one of the most powerful ones and one that I usually like to talk about when I go speak to groups, is a story called 'Martyrs of Rockport.'" he said.

Andrews wrote the story approximately 15 years ago.

"I read about these Hutterite brothers from the Rockport Hutterite colony up in Hanson County ... who had been drafted to fight in World War II," he said. "But of course, as Hutterites, they're pacifists and so it led to all sorts of trouble, which we'll read about. But they ultimately died. Two of them died in prison because of the whole ordeal. So, when I first came across the story, it was not one that the magazine had ever told before.

Andrews said when "South Dakota Magazine" finds a story like this, it tries to put a modern spin on it.

"So I thought it would be great if I could go up to Rockport Hutterite Colony and sort of dig around and see what I can find up there. At this

point in my life, I had never been to a Hutterite colony,” he said. “Of course, they're all over South Dakota, but I had never been to one. I had no idea how receptive they would be to some random unknown outsider coming in and digging up this, what I imagined to be, a painful story for them.”

He contacted the colony's head minister, Joseph Wipf, who invited him to visit. Wipf brought Andrews to the cemetery where the brothers, Michael and Joseph Hofer, are buried.

Below is an excerpt of the story Andrews wrote after that visit to the cemetery, approximately 15 years ago.

“In May 1918, the Hanson County Draft Board sent brothers Michael, Joseph, and David Hofer and their brother-in-law, Jacob Wipf, notices to report to Camp Lewis in Seattle for training.

The four young men felt bound to obey the law, but Hutterites are staunch pacifists, whose religion bars them from even wearing a military uniform. After meeting with their minister, they decided to go to Camp Lewis, but they would refuse all war-related duties. The four went to Parkston to await a westbound train.

Men hurled insults at them as they waited on the platform. Once aboard, they huddled together in a compartment and locked the door. A young draftee from Alexandria begged the Hutterites to let him in, but insisted he simply wanted to talk to them.

When they complied, a whole crowd rushed in. They taunted the Hutterites, then seized Wipf and Michael Hofer and cut pieces of hair from their heads and beards. When the train arrived, commanding officers ordered the men to follow them with their squads.

The Hofer brothers and Wipf refused. They were jailed in the camp's guardhouse. A few

days later, they were ordered to complete standard paperwork, which they also refused.

The four were court-martialed in a trial that took less than three hours. The sentence? Twenty years in the U.S. disciplinary barracks at Alcatraz. Guards at the island prison in San Francisco Bay forcefully removed the men's clothing and ordered them to put on uniforms.

Again, they refused, so they were taken to the cold, damp cells, wearing just light underwear. And since I've written this, I've gotten to take a trip to San Francisco, to Alcatraz, so you can get a better sense of, I mean, you saw the tiny, tiny, cold, damp steel cells where they were actually held. For four and a half days, the only nourishment they received was half a glass of water.

They were forced to spend a day standing with their hands chained crosswise over their heads to the iron bars of their cell, their feet barely touching the floor. The Hofers and Wipf spent four months in the dank desolation of Alcatraz. After the armistice was declared in November 1918, they were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

They arrived late on a cold winter's night, chained by their arms, carrying their bags in one hand and their Bibles in the other. Drenched in sweat, they stood outside in the chill for two hours until prison clothes arrived. The next day, complaining of chest pains, Joseph and Michael Hofer were hospitalized.

David Hofer and Wipf were placed in solitary cells, their hands chained through the doors. They stood for nine hours a day, nourished only by bread and water. As Joseph and Michael Hofer grew frailer, Wipf telegraphed their wives.

The women left for Fort Leavenworth, but because of some confusion, the railroad agent sold them tickets to Fort Riley instead. They lost an entire day of traveling and didn't see their husbands until late on Nov. 29. Joseph Hofer died from pneumonia the next day.

When his wife arrived, she was horrified to find him lying in a coffin, dressed in a military uniform. Michael Hofer died on Dec. 2, also from pneumonia. Because his family was with him when he died, they ensured he was dressed in his own clothes.

After the family returned to South Dakota with the bodies for burial, David Hofer was left in his cell to mourn his brothers. 'I stood there all day and cried,' he said, 'but I could not even wipe my tears away, since my hands were chained to the bars in my prison cell.'"

"If you go to Rockport, they have a little colony cemetery and the brothers are buried there," Andrews said. "They have just very simple metallic nameplates where their graves are marked. But I learned that if you grow up on a Hutterite colony anywhere in North America, you grow up hearing this story and at some point in your life, you take a trip to Rockport Hutterite Colony and you go to the cemetery and you pay your respects to these two martyrs of Rockport, as we call them."

The experience of visiting Rockport, gathering the information and writing about these three men "made me sort of realize the power that stories can have and the reach that they can have," he said.

Andrews said about a year after the story was published, an over-the-road truck driver, while waiting at a mechanic's shop in Utah, saw an issue of "South Dakota Magazine" on a table in the waiting room.

He read the story and called the magazine's office.

"He told me when he finished reading it, he just had to call someone and talk about it and since he didn't know who else to call, he looked at who wrote it and called the magazine and figured, 'well that guy knows what this is all about, so I'll talk to him.' It just made me realize," Andrews said, "when we're putting together a magazine ... you don't know where they're going to go and who's going to read

them and what effect they're going to have on that particular person. That's an instance that just sort of helps cement to me the power of stories and the importance of what we do as a magazine."

During a question-and-answer period near the end of the luncheon meeting, Katie said "South Dakota Magazine" sends 500 copies of its bi-monthly editions all over the globe, from Europe to Asia.

"I think that breakdown is that about 35 to 40% (of subscriptions) are out of state and the rest of them are in state. But we have quite a few readers who don't even have any connection to South Dakota at all," she said. "... A lot of people across the country are really in love with South Dakota."

Katie was asked if her father, Bernie, faced any difficulties in launching the magazine 40 years ago.

"I wish my dad was here to answer this," she said, laughing. "He's always pretty funny when he answers this question because I know he had to sell a cow at one point to pay a printing bill.

"Another story that always got to me was that one time he was driving around the state selling ads and he didn't have enough gas to get home," Katie said. "He was in Mitchell and he was walking in every business to try to sell an ad so he could buy gas money so he could get back to Yankton."

Katie noted that her father always says that South Dakotans were always very supportive of him and willing to trust him enough that he was going to put out the magazine and write him a check for a subscription.

During the question-and-answer session, the topic of "timeless" stories came up.

Andrews shared an anecdote of a friend picking up a magazine in a waiting room and reading several stories, not realizing until he

returned the magazine to a table that it was an issue from 2019.

“He said, ‘I thought it was new. I thought it just came out,’” he said.

“We want these stories to be timeless, but we also are cognizant of the fact that sometimes things happen, like the Missouri River flood in 2011,” Andrews said. “I remember Bernie saying, ‘This is probably something that we should get out and cover immediately.’ Same thing with the Cattleman's Blizzard, Winter Storm Atlas. That was such a cataclysmic event that we knew it was going to be unmatched by anything.

“He sort of had that gut feeling, probably from a lifetime of journalism, that this is something that we need to get out and chronicle,” he said. “It's sort of a mix of these timeless stories and opportunities to get out and capture things as they're happening.”

The two were asked what the next 40 years of “South Dakota Magazine” may be like.

“As you probably all know, a lot of local journalism is either being bought up by conglomerates or they're closing. We think that local journalism is more important than ever, but we realize that that's happening and we're trying to prepare for the future,” Katie Hunhoff said. “We have a new website now ... we have two interns in the office working on it right now, but we're inputting all 40 years of our issues online.”

Paid subscribers to the print magazine will be able to access all of the publication's content from over the past four decades.

“We just have a really renewed sense that what we do is more important now than ever. I feel like we've mentioned that quite a few times throughout this, but we really do want to continue providing an authentic, real voice for South Dakotans, something that's going to unite us as South Dakotans rather than divide us,” Katie Hunhoff said. “We don't know

exactly what the future holds, but we do think that having a unique voice out there that is telling real stories is going to be more important now than ever.

“My gut feeling is that if we keep on telling good stories, the readers will be there for us,” she said.

“I can remember when I was getting out of college, people were already telling me that print was on the way out,” Andrews said.

There's something different about South Dakota Magazine, however, he told Vermillion Rotarians.

“We're telling stories that you can't see in six other media outlets on any given day,” Andrews said. “We treat each issue almost like it's its own work of art – the writing and the photography. And that gets demonstrated when people call us.”

The magazine's staff also frequently gets phone calls from people who, as they're renewing their subscriptions, mention that they can't bear to throw their old issues away. They keep them in binders, stacked in a closet or lining their shelves.

“That means some sort of a connection has been made,” Andrews said, “and I think if we just continue forging that connection and creating this sort of South Dakota Magazine readership family, ... I think we'll be all right.”