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*Hailey Steiert:* This is Hailey Steiert. Today is Oct. 14, 2020. I am interviewing Craig McNeal of the *Council Grove Republican* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists Project. This is part one. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association.

[Post-production note: Craig was born Oct. 23, 1939, in Council Grove, Kansas.]

Okay, what – who were your parents?

*Craig McNeal:* Don McNeal and Lucille Johntz McNeal.

*Hailey Steiert:* Okay. Let’s talk about your father’s journalism career. He started working at the *Council Grove Republican* in 1935 as a college student. How did that come about and why was he interested in journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, if I can – can I stop there just for a minute – [and give] a quick history of the *Council Grove Republican* because –

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I may be different than some of the big city newspaper people you’re talking to, or the team is. *Council Grove Republican* was – the first edition was in August of 1872. It was the *Council Grove Republican* then. Through the years, as it would sell to different people, the name would change.

There was one year in the late 1800s it was the *Democrat* at one time, and again, in the late 1800s, election time, and a lot of these different political parties would come in and start a newspaper. They might only publish one or two issues. Election’s over and they’d go out of business. At that time, Council Grove one year had five different newspapers in a two-week period. As we go in after the Depression and the – probably it was the late 1930s,

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the date escapes me – [the] *Republican*, which had been a weekly, became a six-day-a-week daily, been a daily ever since. And those days, it also published on Saturday morning and that continued until World War II when there was a newsprint shortage, so they discontinued the Saturday paper. Since then, it’s always been a daily, Monday through Friday. Back to my dad then. He was in journalism at K-State and – and that summer of 1935, which would’ve been between his junior and senior year, the owner of the *Republican* [Jack Lawrence] contacted K-State, wanted a student that would come down and publish the paper for two weeks so he could have a vacation.

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Dad -- and I don’t remember why -- of course, he jumped at the chance to take the job and did it that way. And then in, of course, the spring of 1936, he graduated with a degree in journalism. Incidentally, was the only journalism graduate that year to have a job immediately when he got out of college and that was back at the *Council Grove Republican* because Jack had offered him a job.

*Hailey Steiert:* Okay, so he started working there full time in 1936?

*Craig McNeal:* That’s correct.

*Hailey Steiert:* What are some of the memories your father shared with you about those early days of working at the paper?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course, it was a whole different ballgame back then. It was still the hot type linotype –

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days where – how they could get out a paper -- although I guess I was involved in some of the later years of that, but the telephone system was a local system. Still had the candlestick telephones on your desk. If you had to call out and get a story or somebody would call in, you’re taking notes, writing the story on your typewriter, sending the copy back to the three linotypes. Once they had the hot type, it would come up to where they would make up the pages and everything, and then run proofs of it. Come back up. You’d proofread, send it back, changes were made, and finally you’d have the – have it on the page where you wanted it. Compared to today, you write your story on the computer and –

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can edit it right there and hit the button and it’s ready for whoever’s making up the page to put it right where it goes.

[**Post-production addition about additional memories**: Other than the1951flood, already mentioned in one of the interviews, I can remember him saying that in the early days he would have to accompany the sheriff to major accidents to obtain facts for a story, and in one accident the man driving the vehicle was thrown out and decapitated, the head ending up several feet from the body.

Another story had a better ending. Before the time when funeral homes started submitting obituary information, newspapers had to call the family to obtain the info. One day, a report came in that a man in a rural area of the county had died. Dad called the home, and to his surprise, the man who supposedly died answered the telephone.

Dad had a good sense of humor and could laugh at his own mistakes. One year, in a full-page advertisement for the local men's clothing store one of the sale features was men's "SHIRTS" in big type near the top of the adv. Dad, in proofreading, overlooked that the "R" was missing. The entire press run was completed, and the newspapers distributed locally and/or mailed before the error was discovered. Dad took a lot of kidding for the error, and it won the Blooper Award at the next Kansas Press Association convention.

One weekend, couple friends from out of town brought their boat to Council Grove and they, along with Dad and Mom, spent a warm summer evening on the local reservoir. Late that Saturday night, they ran out of gas in the middle of the 2,500-acre lake, without a paddle and no one on the reservoir to help them. Hours later, they finally made it to shore, paddling with their hands.]

*Hailey Steiert:* When he officially started at the *Republican*, it says that he made $15 a week. Was that a lot of money for that time?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, it’s kind of funny. It doesn’t seem much to us today, does it? I’m guessing back then, you’re not too many years out of the Depression. Probably any job was good money. I know he and Mother married a year later, and he got a raise to $25 a week, and of course today as – as a journalism student coming out, I’m guessing you wouldn’t accept a job for $15 an hour, let alone $15 a week.

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*Hailey Steiert:* What was the form –

*Craig McNeal:* Apparently, they were able to live on that. One, as a $15 single man, and $25 as a married couple. I know he always joked about that year he took the job, came to Council Grove on the bus, and he said, “A week or two later, the bus line went out of service here.” And he joked he could never get out of town.

[**Post-production addition:** He stayed on at the Republican, and other than the war years and one year in public relations with City Service Oil Company in Bartlesville, Okla., he was involved in publishing the newspaper here for all but 10 of the 82 years the McNeal father/son team was in the business.]

*Hailey Steiert:* What was the former owner, Jack Lawrence, like?

*Craig McNeal:* Jack, uh – of course when I was a young boy -- was an older man. He – I remember he had a desk in –

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the front of the office, but Dad would do most of the writing. They had another person that would do sports and advertising sales, and I think, like, Jack wasn’t quite retired but close to it, and didn’t – didn’t put in the hours like he would’ve, I’m sure, as a young man because he owned the paper for quite a few years. A real nice man – I know he was always nice to me. Had his – he would have his grandson [Larry Tietz] and I go out to their lodge up in the mountain above Green Mountain Falls, Colorado, for a week or two for a couple – three summers in a row. And one year had his grandson and I out for trout fishing and camping up in the mountains and things, so really enjoyed him.

*Hailey Steiert:* Did your father –

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share any memories of what it was like during the Depression years?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, that would’ve been, uh – really, the Depression was what, late 1929 into the early 1929 -- through the early 1933, probably. He would’ve been in high school. The family had a small farm at Boyle, Kansas, which is near Valley Falls. His father [Charles McNeal] operated the general store there. I think, as I remember, they also sold feed and seed. Dad would always tell me about – he had four brothers and two sisters. One of his other brothers, Dean, and my dad would go to Valley Falls on Saturday nights and put on exhibition boxing matches –

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to make a little money to help them out, and of course on the farm, they had a little bit of livestock and chickens and – and things like that. The one thing I remember about the general store was my granddad was blind, and he would run the store, the one-room store, by himself. I could remember if I was visiting with the family on a weekend or something, fascinated, sitting in the store by the potbellied stove. And these customers would come in, choose what they needed in the way of canned goods or whatever, and they would write it down on a logbook. And then my grandmother [Cora McNeal] would bill them later, and I always wondered, in this day and age, would people be that honest and write down everything, but there was no record –

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or stories of anyone ever trying to cheat him or anything. I know there were times that there were hardships for some of the customers, and they would carry them a long, long time, to let them pay and everything. I guess if Dad’s message out of it would be, you know, he learned and tried to pass onto my sisters and I, you’ve got to work hard. You’ve got to live modestly, and I know there -- and when television came along, not everybody in Council Grove had a TV set, and we didn’t until I was a senior in high school [1957]. And I remembered they delivered it, put up the rotor antenna, and when Dad came home that night, we turned it on, and the first thing we watched was the NCAA –

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basketball championship game, which in those days was played in Kansas City Municipal Auditorium, and that night, KU and Wilt Chamberlain lost by one point to North Carolina in a triple overtime. Through the years, it’s kind of been noted as probably the greatest game ever.

*Hailey Steiert:* What impact do you think – did the Depression have on his life overall?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, uh – well, maybe like I kind of just mentioned – you had to work, and you had to work long hours. And you know, we wouldn’t kid people when we’d tell them here, both he and myself, you’d put in -- trying to run a small-town daily newspaper, you’d put in some weeks 60, 70 hours a week because you’d have your 7:30, 8 in the morning –

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through 6 usually in the evening before you’d get away to go home, and then there’d always be a city council or a school board meeting to cover and there were – you’d get into basketball season. There would be Tuesday and Friday games for the high school. This time of year, you’d have Friday night football. You’d have Monday and Tuesday night volleyball and all kinds of stuff, so – and – and then a lot of times you’d go back to the office. And Saturdays, Saturday mornings you’d be down there, writing your football stories, and a lot of times on Sunday, doing the same thing because we’d try to cover a few in the area, high schools, back in those days. Several of those have been, unified in with others, so really there’s not any – only one other high school we were covering at the time I sold the paper.

*Hailey Steiert:* He briefly left the paper –

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to do public relations with Cities Service Oil Company in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Why did he make that move?

*Craig McNeal:* You know, I was only a few months old then, but through the years, what little he would talk about that move, I have a feeling it was he’d started a family now and probably was testing the waters for a better paying job. I’m sure that was in public relations, and everything with Cities Service as compared to small town journalism. But he gave it a year and I think quickly realized his love was newspapers, and that sort of writing and publishing, and returned to Council Grove then and back to the *Republican.*

*Hailey Steiert:* He served as an officer in the U.S. Army during World War II –

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attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel. Where did your father serve during the war?

*Craig McNeal:* Well … he was a reserve officer, which I think, as I remember, probably was commissioned out of K-State and ROTC, but of course, the World War II was from 19 to – trying to think. What was it? Well, I guess it had started. The United States was drawn into it in December of 1941, of course when the Japanese attack and bomb Pearl Harbor. So, probably it was about, as I remember, early 1942 then that they were calling up reserve military and officers.

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Dad was called up, sent to Fort Benning in Georgia, where he was in charge of the officer training school, and the family went with him. I can vaguely remember the officer quarters, which were limestone houses, rather than the old Army military wood barracks that the soldiers would be in. And really about the only other thing I remember was across the street was the paratrooper training towers, and they would have big, tall towers. They had a way of hooking the parachute up on a cable and these paratroopers would jump off the tower, and this would safely let them come down and learn how to control your chute and land and things like that. My sister [Joan Taylor], who was two years younger than me –

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would’ve been just real, real young, and then my younger sister [Pam Hunter], who was four years younger than I am, was born there at Fort Benning. After about a year and a half, then Dad was sent to Alaska. The family then returned to Abilene, Kansas, where Mother’s folks [Ira and Lillian Johntz] lived, and I remember at the time they were always – I – you know. You say, “Why Alaska?” And they were always worried at the time that if the Germans swept through Russia or whatever, they’d just come right across that Bering Strait up there and take over Alaska, and come on down into the United States, so there were quite a few troops stationed up there. I can kind of – don’t remember too much about the wars and his talking about it.

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I assume he would just bring up things that real young children should hear. I do remember his phone calls from Alaska, and you know, talking about it would be dark 20 hours a day or whatever certain – certain times of year. And then, one day he called, and I forget what the temperature was in Abilene, but it was colder here in Kansas than it was in Alaska that day.

*Hailey Steiert:* Soon after the war, he became a partner with Lawrence in the *Republican* on Jan. 1, 1947. Talk about what newspapering was like back in those days and any big stories that he would’ve covered.

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I think I mentioned earlier about, you know, the candlestick phone and the typewriter to the linotype, and – and all that process, and then the paper was printed on the old Goss –

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flatbed press. Probably the big story that I would remember, and he would have many, many, you know – probably a few murders and fires and droughts and everything else along the way, but the big story was the 1951 flood. Our family lived in the Post Office Oak, which is a famous two-story limestone building on the Santa Fe Trail. And it was not on a hill, but elevated quite a way above the street. Dad was able, when they sounded the sirens the first morning of the flood, was able – the Main Street Bridge was just a block west of the house. He was able to get up, get across the bridge just as water was starting to lap over, and of course he never could get home, uh –

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so stayed with friends there on the west side of town. They were able each day to publish a paper on the old hand-fed Clapper press, if you’re at all familiar with that. It was hand-fed, had a big flywheel on it you could turn, and print whatever number you had. And it was printed on an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of paper, one-sided, but they were able to get out the basic news. The fact that the National Guard was coming in and bringing bottled water and things like that, and uh – all of the basic news. I can remember they delivered some of the papers by boat, of course, the whole east side of town was underwater, and the water up through -- the business district had like 39 inches of water –

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there in the newspaper office. So, they were doing all this work, standing up, doing their typewriting and running this flatbed – or I mean the old Goss flatbed press. I can remember they delivered to as many houses as they could that were under floodwater by boat. And Dad still would tell the story and laugh about people calling in when they could, complaining because their paper carrier missed them, and of course their house might’ve had who knows how much water. I know at the Post Office Oak, we had a foot of water on the main floor, and that made it probably about 20 feet deep out down to the street level. It was the third day of the flood before they could get a boat in to rescue my mom and my two sisters and me. It took us east, to a school building –

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where we were able to stay for a next night or so before floodwater finally stayed down and – and we could get across town to stay with friends where Dad was for a few days while they were kind of cleaning up the Post Office Oak.

*Hailey Steiert:* At one point, a rumor spread around town that your father had died after a head surgery. From the hospital, he wrote a column letting people know his demise was greatly exaggerated. What was it like with the circulating rumors of your father’s death and that whole saga?

*Craig McNeal:* *[Laughs]* Well, he, uh – Mother at the time was in the rest home and we had taken her downtown for a Washunga Days Parade and – Council Grove’s big, big, celebration in June. And I was off taking parade photos and everything, and after the parade –

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Dad was pulling her backwards into the newspaper office, and she was in her wheelchair. He got partly in the door and the hand grip slipped off. He fell backwards and hit his head on the – we had an old bank counter, and it was out of the Farmers & Drovers Bank across the street, and it was, oh, you know, more than 100 years old, but hit it on the old marble part that would’ve been where the teller cages were. He cut his head some, but it didn’t look bad. Didn’t need stitches, and we didn’t think about it. A few, like, weeks later, we started to notice in the office he was, you know, not doing a lot of work and holding his head down and complaining of a headache. So, got him up to the, hospital emergency room one night, and he – an X-ray showed he’d developed a big blood pool between his brain and the inside of his skull.

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And they transferred him immediately to Stormont Vail in Topeka, and the doctor in there decided he needed surgery immediately, so I remember going in. He – he had the surgery. They were able to drill four holes in the top of his head, and flush and everything and get that blood pool out. The doctor said everything went great, should recover in a few days, and he’d send him home, but the next morning, one of the gals in the office had gone to the post office to get the mail out of our PO Box, and the clerk there working said, oh, how sorry she was to hear about Dad’s death. And we found out the story had just swept all over town, if you know small towns and rumors, but anyway, fortunately I still –

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had time to put in that he’d had surgery, and everything had gone well in the paper that day. And then, I had gone back in to see Dad, tell him what was going on, and that was when he wrote the – well, he published a column he called “Some Odd Ends.” And he just whipped out a few paragraphs that I wrote down and could type the next morning for him that said, uh – you know, the story of his death had been greatly exaggerated, kind of the – the old – I forget who it was that said that famously [Mark Twain] and everything. But anyway, he recovered – recovered great and had several more good years in the office before he went to assisted living.

*Hailey Steiert:* Your father spent his entire newspaper career at the *Republican*. Did he ever consider going anywhere else?

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Why was this – why was the paper so important to him?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, you know, other than that year at Cities Service, when I was – this would’ve been maybe about a junior in high school, probably ’56, somewhere in there, he was offered the job as the executive director of the Kansas State University Alumni Association. It was a full-time job in Manhattan on the campus, and I think it’s something he really would – really would’ve been interested in at that time, but I remember him deciding that he didn’t want to interrupt, my – I would’ve been a junior and my middle sister [Joan], middle child in our family –

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a freshman, and the youngest sister [Pam], a seventh grader. He didn’t want to take us out of school here and interrupt our high school, so he turned the job down. I think he always loved the small-town journalism. Probably – well, I know he didn’t make the money even – even probably owning the paper or half the paper with me. We didn’t make the money you would of – you know, as editor or a higher up on *Kansas City Star* or *Times* at that – in those days that you did in a small town, but there was just something special about not specializing in sports, or obituaries, or government, or whatever. You did it all. Like I said –

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you’d be covering all the ball games in town, out of town, city council meetings, school board meetings, county commission meetings, all that. You’d even get the calls in from the little country churches that they were having a chicken noodle supper fundraiser this Saturday night, and you’d put in the basic information on the time and – and everything. So, you just did everything. You did it all.

*Hailey Steiert:* Over 72 years, your father wrote more than 200,000 stories. He also received numerous honors during his lifetime, including the Clyde M. Reed Jr. Master Editor Award, the Kansas State University Alumni Medallion Award, and the Huck Boyd Leader of the Year Award. What do you think his journalism legacy is?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I think definitely a major leader in the community.

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He was a master of his profession. He also was president of the Kansas Press Association, president of the Kansas State Alumni Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and was a charter member of the local Kiwanis Club, and of course president of that, eventually. You know, I think – I think you just go back to the leadership there, definitely the voice or spokesman of the community on a lot of matters.

*Hailey Steiert:* What was the reception like from the town when your father passed away?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, by that time, he was 94 years old, had moved from the assisted living, where he was still able to get out and come down to the office, into the rest home –

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because he could, at that stage, room with Mother up until she died earlier that year. At that age, I mean people knew he was in the rest home. The last six months or so, he wasn’t coming to the office. He would still like to write his little “Some Odd Ends” column and – but he’d do it on a tape recorder, and one of the girls would pick it up and retype it for him. And so, he stayed pretty active, although people knew he wasn’t downtown and didn’t see him a lot unless they were really close and visiting – visited him in the rest home. So, I – you know, I think something like that was expected at some time, but a very large turnout for the funeral, you know?

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Kind of a lot of extra chairs and standing room in the church and everything.

*Hailey Steiert:* Now, let’s shift onto your own life story. What influence did your parents have on your life?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I think, probably they always challenged myself and my sisters to do good in school, good in sports, whatever we were involved in that way, and to attend college. They really emphasized that and wanted us all to get a college degree, and then go whichever we wanted to go from there.

*Hailey Steiert:* Did you have any brothers or sisters?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I have two sisters. The one that – Joan is two years younger. She went into education at K-State, got her teacher’s degree, went to Chapman, Kansas, and taught there –

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at the middle school level mostly up until she retired. Her husband [Larry Taylor] also was on the – music and band director at Chapman. My youngest sister, Pam, four years younger, became a -- she married a young man [Gary Hunter] from Council Grove that was in law school at KU. She became a paralegal. She’s now retired from that, and first worked in Colorado and they’re now in the Tempe, Arizona, area.

*Hailey Steiert:* Is there anyone else in your family or extended family who worked in journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, yes and no. I mentioned my fraternal grandfather that had the general store at Boyle, Kansas –

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and of course, his wife would’ve been a, I guess what you’d call a housewife today, and my maternal grandparent was – a city mail carrier in Abilene [Ira Johntz], and grandmother [Lillian Johntz] would’ve been a housewife. I have two children. My son – they both graduated from K-State. My son [Mike] got a degree in business administration. He's now sales manager and finance officer at Louisburg Ford just south of Olathe, where they live, he and his family. My daughter, Marci, another K-State graduate, she was in public relations and mass communications. Did work on the *Collegian* newspaper there, but got a job immediately out of college –

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in public relations and has moved up the line, the ladder, a couple – three times since then to much better paying jobs, and now is chapter relations director for the American Academy of Family Physicians, and their national headquarters is in Kansas City. She lives in Olathe, and of course is over the 50 state chapters, does some writing still for them, and of course when they have national conventions and things like that, she’s there putting those on.

*Hailey Steiert:* How would you describe your family’s expectations for you when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, um – they never pushed me or ever mentioned to go into journalism.

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The main emphasis – emphasis was definitely wanted us to go to college, and I’m sure that might’ve been a little bit of a hardship – hardship with three of us that went through K-State, although we all had summer jobs and things like that that helped a little bit. And um – I had a little bit of scholarship money, being on the swimming team at K-State, that basically would cover books and tuition, but I remember in those days I started as a freshman and books – no, tuition was $98 a semester and by the time I was a senior, it was $104. So, you know, compare that with today and – and again, you weren’t getting rich working anywhere, but probably that was cheaper –

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I’m sure than what it would compare to today, compared to jobs you might be able to get and everything.

*Hailey Steiert:* Were you immediately being primed to work for the newspaper?

*Craig McNeal:* No. No, like I said, never pushed. We – both sisters and I at some time during the year, you’d – you’d maybe work at the newspaper office rolling single wraps, which probably don’t mean anything to you, but newspapers that weren’t delivered, quite a few into a community, or into Council Grove by carrier, or even through the mail in the county, they were addressed on a piece of paper that you rolled up around the paper and glued the end. And they all went to the post office and would go out all over the United States –

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or the rest of Kansas, wherever people were taking the paper. But other than that, didn’t – didn’t do any writing, maybe track meet results or something like that when I was on the school newspaper staff that they could use in the *Republican*, but other than that, no. No – no push or anything to go to K-State and major in journalism or anything.

*Hailey Steiert:* What was your hometown like when you were growing up there?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, Council Grove is today – I think in the last Census we were at just slightly under 2,100 people in a county that is probably a little under 6,000. We’re the county seat, definitely a rural community here. I remember –

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back in those days as a kid on Saturday nights, all the stores stayed open till 9 at night. It had a, you know, good business district, and everybody, no matter where, from the farms and everything all over the area and the county, and of course everybody in town – everybody was downtown. It was kind of a big social event, and you had a chance to see people you only saw once a week, and of course the out-of-town people could shop and things like that. And uh – again, Council Grove is a historical town, was the birth – considered the birthplace of the Santa Fe Trail, was the site where the wagon trains would stay a few days or a week until they could organize bigger trains to go on to Santa Fe, New Mexico, through –

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Indian territory and everything. It was a -- I guess what you’d call a safe community. Still is compared to the trouble you see in some of the larger towns today with the daily shootings and murders and all that. I could remember you could get on your bicycle and ride it all over town. Your parents never worried about where you were or what you were doing. Even – even with the local telephone company, if you needed to get ahold of mom or dad, you’d stop somewhere where you could get on a telephone and that was the days that the old switchboard operator, where I suppose your light flashed on, and she’d plug one thing in, and you’d say what number you wanted, like the newspaper number was [78], and she’d plug you into [78] or your home number –

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was [172] but usually if my sisters or I called the newspaper office, a lot of times if Dad was out on a story or something, somewhere on the street, the operator, you know, you’d say, “I want to call [78]” and she’d say, “Oh. I recognize your voice.” She said, “Are you trying to get your dad?”

And you’d say, “Yeah.” And she said, “Oh, you know, I just saw him go across the street to Rexall Drugstore, probably to get a cup of coffee. I’ll ring him over there.” And of course, they’d answer the phone over there, and call him up, and get him on the phone. So, you know, friendly community, safe, definitely rural.

*Hailey Steiert:* What was the media environment like when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course, here – here in Council Grove, by the time I was born and growing up, we were back to a five-day-a-week daily, Monday through Friday, you know, covered –

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all the news in the city and county, out of government and schools and sports, everything like that. It kind of was the, uh – really the main communication and news piece of the whole area because there wasn’t a TV back then. We didn’t have – didn’t have then, never have, and don’t have a radio station here or anything. As far as the family goes, I grew up, other than the *Republican*, reading the *Kansas City Times* and the *Kansas City Star*, which at that time were two papers. You got the *Times* in the morning, the *Star* in the evening. That was kind of where I would read a lot of the national, international news, and I’ve always been fascinated by all of that sort of stuff, and today still will get --

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I take the *Topeka Capital-Journal* and of course the *Council Grove Republican,* but I take them on e-edition, but I’ll still sit down, instead of skipping to sports or some other section, I’ll read every page and about every story that catches my eye. I’m just fascinated with the news.

*Hailey Steiert:* How would you describe the general expectations for men and for women in the place when – in Council Grove, when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, you know, today a lot of people drive to Manhattan and Emporia to work in some major -- it might be the meat packing plant, or other things like that. We have several people here who are maybe on the faculty or work on the K-State campus –

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and other places in Manhattan. Back when I was growing up, you know, it was more people would stay around here, particularly, say, as they’d get out of high school, many of them wouldn’t go on to college. Some of them would get jobs here in town, or in some of the local industry, or particularly maybe out on farms and ranches. A lot of them maybe in my high school class might be on the family farm or ranch and would stay on there and eventually take those over. Some would marry, some would go to the military.

*Hailey Steiert:* What was the general media environment like in the United States when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I don’t want to criticize my profession today, but I think back then, they were more fair –

*[0:43:00]*

maybe – definitely I would say more informative, probably more impartial. I don't know. They were really the main – main source of – source of the news back then because there was no television and radio. You, of course, don’t get anywhere the scope and detail of what you get out of print media. I remember really, other than the *Kansas City Times* and *Star*, as far as some of that international type news – you’d go to the movie theater, which we had here, on Saturday night. And I’m sure it was the same in any town, but they’d have the little eight- or 10-minute news thing on that would be like watching television, I guess –

*[0:44:00]*

but would kind of give the highlights of the news in the past week or month, and you know, you’d get a little bit out of that.

*Hailey Steiert:* You were young, but what memories of World War II do you have?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I – yeah, I maybe mentioned that at Fort Benning, I can remember my sister, Joan, two years younger, was really young, and where we were living -- Dad was in the officer’s housing. I can remember my younger sister, Pam, who is four years younger, was born at Fort Benning in the military hospital. I can remember, you know, going across the street, just day after day after day, fascinated by the paratrooper training, and I can remember Dad’s calls from Alaska, when we were back in Abilene –

*[0:45:00]*

telling us not so much about the war because we were pretty young, but more about Alaska and you know, “We saw bears in town today,” or moose or whatever, and how cold it was and how dark it was at certain times of year for almost day and night and everything. Um –

[**Post-production addition:** “It was a serious time in our history, soldiers were being sent overseas to fight, some were killed, but she kept it on a need-to-know basis so not to scare or worry us since Dad was in the Army.”

*Hailey Steiert:* What memories do you have of the day Franklin Roosevelt died?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, boy. You know, to be honest, I do not remember anything about that. I’m not – I’m not even sure if he, uh – died in the ‘40s [1945] or something when I would’ve been really young, but probably read about it or something, but don’t remember when, or how, or anything.

*Hailey Steiert:* You mentioned, in 1951, the rising river resulted in 39 inches of water in the newspaper office, but the *Republican* –

*[0:46:00]*

still managed to publish a paper on a much smaller scale, one by one, from a handfed press. Papers were even delivered by boat to some sub – some subscribers. Can you tell us more about that, other than what you’ve already told me?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I probably pretty well covered that. I remember, they printed the 8 ½ by 11, one-sided newspaper for two or three days on the old hand-fed Clapper press, delivered them by boat where they could. And he always telling us about all the complaints they got from people who didn’t get a paper in the floodwaters. And you know, their house probably was water up how deep, and they were living upstairs or something, and um – but that – that was kind of – of all the years I can remember probably was –

*[0:47:00]*

the big thing, and when I was old enough to remember everything –

*Hailey Steiert:* What other – oh, go ahead.

*Craig McNeal:* I started to say when I said news events, I could remember following the floods, and we went through the time of what they called big dam foolishness, and that was the big drive to get federal funding to dam these major rivers, particularly in northeastern Kansas, and that would’ve included Council Grove. A real bitter back and forth from people all over the state that thought, “Damn foolish to put money into that to building big reservoirs and things.” And of course, the support for us. I know delegations –

*[0:48:00]*

would go from here to Washington, D.C., as well as other eastern Kansas communities to talk to Congress and our congressmen, senators, and everything, trying to get that funding, which eventually they did, and uh – the Council Grove reservoir now, oh, is about a couple miles maybe at the most north of town. It prevented many floods during the years since then, and of course, you know, it’s also good for water recreation. It was honored just a few years ago as having some of the best campsites in the United States, and of course, several other reservoirs, you know? There’s the two over what, northwest of Lawrence, and uh –

*[0:49:00]*

Pomona reservoir, and – and Tuttle Creek reservoir at Manhattan. The major project there that’s protected Manhattan so many times, but that was big news for years after the ’51 flood. It was probably, oh, 10 years or so before they started getting the money to build those.

*Hailey Steiert:* What other news events were most important when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* You know, I’m going to say, other than the flood, and other than this big dam foolishness drive to get money – the two big things, later, and I would’ve been back here on the paper then, the Missouri Pacific Railroad closed their line that went from here – through here to Colorado, and of course, you know, the town people spent a lot of time –

*[0:50:00]*

trying to convince Missouri Pacific to keep the line open, but eventually they pulled up all the rails. And today, it’s a rail trail where you can walk or ride bikes all the way from Osawatomie through Council Grove to Herington, which is west of here. It’s about a 100-mile trail, so it’s used, but of course it’s nothing like having the rail service.

*Hailey Steiert:* What was your childhood like?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, probably, I assume, typical at – at least *[laughs]* what – what I’d consider typical. Again, safe community. You could get on your bike, ride anywhere in town, had a nice library. I can remember when I was younger and we were living in that Post Office Oak, in the summertime I could get on my bike, ride across the bridge, go a couple blocks.

*[0:51:00]*

Be at the library, check out two or three books in the morning. And again, I loved to read, no matter what it was, go back home, and I could read all two or three books in a day and go back that afternoon and check out more, or at least go back the next morning and get more. I can – I can remember, going to Abilene at times and staying with my grandparents. He'd always take me fishing, and every day we’d go out to Lake Redbud, I guess it was west of Abilene, and enjoyed that. Of course, I was in Boy Scouts, so a lot of camping and summer camps and things there, and of course, by, oh, probably the late ‘40s, we had built an old fill and draw swimming pool here, and so, you know, you could –

*[0:52:00]*

you could go down into the football field area where the pool and bathhouse were. Probably went down there about every day, I’m sure and – and went swimming. When I was in college then, a little later, I managed the pool for the city, and of course when I say, “an old fill and draw pool,” you fill it up on Saturday night and no filter system.

It had a chlorinator, but uh – so come the next week, a week later, you’d drain it on Friday night, hosed it out, maybe Saturday night, depending on what was going on, scrub it down, fill it back up, and it’d be clear again for a few days. It’d start to get a little murky by a week later. But anyway, a lot of things to do, like say we had a movie theater on Main Street, which is not open today.

*[0:53:00]*

But, always a good Gene Autry or Roy Rogers cowboy movie on Saturday night you could go to.

*Hailey Steiert:* What did you want to be when you grew up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I never really had any thought of being in the newspaper business, and I don’t really remember if I even thought about it. I – I think if anything, because I loved school, I always thought maybe I’d end up being a teacher and a coach, maybe, and that’s probably it *[laughs]*.

*Hailey Steiert:* Did you have a role model when you were growing up?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, my dad. Not so much from the journalism end of it, as you can see, and probably my coaches at junior high and high school.

*Hailey Steiert:* You were an editor of your high school newspaper, the *Trailblazer*. What memories do you have from that?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course it was a class project, and I remember a fun class where, you know, wasn’t any strict discipline.

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You were up all the time, working on stories with somebody else, and having a lot of fun and everything. I know you had to keep up with what they – in those days, I don't know what you’d have today, but called a string book, where you would paste all your stories that were published in a book, and that was how the teacher measured and graded you. And I remember how shocked I was years later *[doorbell chime]* to go back and read some of my stories and – and how bad they were or really weren’t up to par to what you could write coming out of journalism school.

*Hailey Steiert:* Did you participate in any clubs or sports?

*Craig McNeal:* In high school, I lettered in football, basketball, track, and golf. Went to the state golf tournament all four years in high school and um –

*[0:55:00]*

then was oh, in the Letterman’s Club, in the play cast, and class officer, things like that.

*Hailey Steiert:* Okay. This is the end of part one.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Carlos Peterson:* This is Carlos Peterson. Today is Oct. 10 of 2020. I am interviewing Craig McNeal of the *Council Grove Republican*. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID pandemic.

This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association. This is episode two.

So, Craig, we’re going to move more into your educational preparation for your career. So, you attended Kansas State and earned a bachelor’s in business administration in 1961. Why choose business administration rather than journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, coming out of high school, I don’t remember exactly why I wanted a background in business and – with minors in sales and finance, if I remember right.

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So, I got my degree that way, and didn’t – didn’t get interested in journalism until, you know, got back in grad school.

*Carlos Peterson:* And then what prompted that interest in journalism when you did go – end up going to grad school?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I’d had my Kansas National Guard six months’ active duty, basic training and advanced training, when I got back to Council Grove, and by that time I decided I wanted to go back to grad school, and if I did, I wanted to work in that field of journalism then.

*Carlos Peterson:* And then, during your time as a news editor at the Kansas State *Collegian*, the staff was recognized as the first newspaper in the U.S. to publish the story of the shooting of – of President Kennedy and his staff. Can you talk about the memories of the Kennedy assassination and then, uh –

*[0:02:00]*

particularly your coverage that day?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, like you said, I was news editor. I remember it was over the noon hour, and I was sitting in, I don't know. I suppose it was our conference room, with maybe one or two other staff members in there. We were on the UPI, (Universal Press International) as far as our site, not the AP, and all of a sudden, the bells started just going wild. If I remember right, 18 of them, and – and that was unusual.

It might be one [bell] when a new story was completed and things. So, I got up, went over to the machine, and it said President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, is all it said. And I thought, “Wow, we got a story here.” We’d already, uh – sent everything down. In fact, they were in the pressroom –

*[0:03:00]*

down in the basement at Kedzie Hall, and the early papers had already gone out around the campus to the boxes where students could pick them up. So, I remembered running down to the basement and telling them to stop the press. By the time I got back up to the teletype, it had a little bit more of what they were doing, and so I started putting a little bit of a story together, and then suddenly, we got the – the message then that he had died. So, I had, a few kids that were hanging around Kedzie go out and pick ‘em up, the original papers from the mailbox while I was doing the story. Back in those days, we always looked for a chance to do a headline in color. Never had too many chances, and it took a lot of extra work on the old flatbed presses, but we decided while I was doing the story, we’d make the headline red.

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Well then, by the time I’d done the story and he’d died, that didn’t make sense to run it in red, so we ended up going back to a black headline. We got the story down. It wasn’t a full-length story, but you know, enough to control what was going on, and we were able to put that out then within minutes back across campus. Now I was trying to think, um – well, I had started to say I guess the interesting thing was that, of course, all these other major papers would’ve already gone to press for their evening edition and things, and a lot of them I read later just carried the story of the speech he was to give in Dallas, kind of the highlights of the speech, and – and no reference at all to the fact he’d been shot or died.

*Carlos Peterson:* And – and then you had mentioned –

*[0:05:00]*

when you were writing the story, obviously technology wasn’t – isn’t what it was today. What was the, I guess, the process of writing a – a story like that when you *[audio cuts out]* – I guess –

*Craig McNeal:* Well, back then of course it’d be on the typewriter. You’d edit your copy. You’d go down to the basement and they’d set the story on the linotypes. You know, those were still the hot type days, and headlines would’ve been set on what they called a Ludlow, which allowed you to come out with the 24-point, or 36-point, or whatever type style and headlines you wanted.

*Carlos Peterson:* And – and I guess more so is what I’m asking in terms of like, the information gathering process, obviously it was kind of happening in real time. I guess what was that process like?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course I was getting the feed off of the UPI teletype –

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and it was just coming over in sentences, and so as I was sitting down, I was using their – using their wording the best I could, and of course the Dallas and the UPI slug line and everything, but – kind of had to put it together a little bit myself to make sense. And you know, it came over: the location where he’d been shot, and the fact that they were en route to the hospital, and uh – today I can’t even remember the name of the hospital down there he went to [Parkland], but then it – it didn’t take too long, and it came over that he had died. So, at that stage decided, you know, I couldn’t – couldn’t keep going on with a whole lot more. I had to really finish the story and – and do a headline and get it down to where they could start up the presses again.

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*Carlos Peterson:* Now, obviously the – the common theme in this was that you were at the – the *Collegian* at the time. What other memories do you have of the campus newspaper while you were at, um – while you were in Manhattan?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, as far as being on the staff, you know, it was a fun experience. Pretty laid back and relaxed and everything, but you had to get a paper out each day. Made a lot of friends. Oh, I was trying to think – a lot of late nights. I started out the first time as sports editor. I had one girl on my staff, and so I was doing most of the sports writing, and a lot of nights I’d be up there till midnight maybe, and you can still get your stories down to the basement, when they’d come in early in the morning to start up the linotypes, and – and setting the stories and everything. Back – back on the –

*[0:08:00]*

President Kennedy, I remember, and I don’t remember now whether it was the National Newspaper Association or, or what it was -- somehow came out with the fact that the *Collegian* was the first newspaper in the United States to carry the story of the shooting and death. I remember, you know, we had to do a staff photo, and it was sent in somewhere and was published in a magazine. At one time I had their magazine, whoever it was, and I don't know where that is now, but – and I can say now, like I mentioned a minute ago, where it just happened at the right time that we just started that day’s press run. Had a few papers out on campus that we were able to get some kids out and pick up, and then within –

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I don't know, as fast as the stuff was coming over UPI, and as fast I could keep putting a story together that made sense, we were able to get right back down on the press and get right back out on the campus, so probably we very well could’ve been the first paper then that carried it.

[**Post-production addition:** What does it mean to you to have that role in history?

It was something special to me since I was news editor of the Collegian and responsible for page one. We were lucky we had just gone to press when I noticed the United Press International (UPI) bulletin on the teletype machine, and it took only minutes to stop the press and change the main story to cover the shooting and death.]

*Carlos Peterson:* And I know you had mentioned that you were a sports editor at the *Collegian*. What was, uh – obviously you had mentioned, I guess, the day-to-day minutiae of being the sports editor, but was there anything in particular that sticks out to you in your coverage?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, in – in those days, I suppose K-State was a little like KU now in football. We didn’t – didn’t win very many games, so it was kind of tough to – to do stories and – and uh *[laughs]*, make ‘em sound positive and everything. Basketball was good. KU was good, like they are now. In fact, while I was sports editor, I remember –

*[0:10:00]*

a time or two when we’d play each other and be ranked one and two in the nation. So, you know, exciting there, covering those games and everything. The young lady that was my only sportswriter, I remembered, at – in those days at K-State Stadium, Memorial Stadium, they wouldn’t let women in the press box no matter how big a paper you were or anything. And – and that kind of bugged me a little bit, and I remember talking to the athletic director and some of those people and – and saying, “Hey, you know, I don’t want to make a big deal out of this, but I can’t see any legal reason, for you to keep a woman out.” Well, the answer was that all the cigar smoking sports writers and editors from around the Big 8 at that time in Kansas –

*[0:11:00]*

didn’t want women in there. And I said, “I want to get her up there, and I want her to cover the atmosphere. I’ll do the game story, but I want her to kind of do that experience of what it’s like up there and what’s going on.” Finally, they let me take her up there with me. I think some of the sports writers were kind of shocked when she came in, but didn’t have any trouble. In fact, two or three games left in the season, I just kept taking her back with me, and she was kind of accepted from there. I’m sure today probably there’s a lot of different women, whether it’s a student newspaper, or the larger city papers probably have women out there that are now in the press box.

[**Post-production addition:** Why was it so important for you to do that?

Maybe a little rebel in me before the days of women's rights.  Women were barred from the press box, even staff members on large newspapers.  I didn't think that was right, had a young female sportswriter, and went through K-State Athletic Department channels to present my case and obtain approval for her to join us in covering the game.]

*Carlos Peterson:* Do you remember the – the name of that reporter, by any chance?

*Craig McNeal:* Yeah. Her name was Susan Farha.

*Carlos Peterson:* Okay.

*Craig McNeal:* F-A-R-H-A –

*[0:12:00]*

And if I remember right, she was from Wichita. I kind of lost track of her through the years, so I don't know where she is now or what she might have ended up doing. Seems like her family was in the grocery business, and she would tell me about Farha Groceries [Farha Brothers Super Market] in Wichita. Probably today they don’t exist either with the Dillons and everything else that would’ve taken over.

*Carlos Peterson:* I’m sorry. Could you spell her last name one more time?

*Craig McNeal:* Yeah. If I remember right, it was F-A-R-H-A.

*Carlos Peterson:* Mm-hmm. Okay.

*Craig McNeal:* First name was Susan.

*Carlos Peterson:* Okay, and it’s just the typical S-U-S-A-N?

*Craig McNeal:* Or no. She was a S-U-S-A-N, if I remember correctly.

*Carlos Peterson:* Okay. All right, I do have that. Okay, but – and then obviously –

*[0:13:00]*

the *Republican* being a big part of your family, did – did you work at, I guess at the – the *Republican* – at that time, did you work at the *Republican* during college at all?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, not – not really writing-wise or anything. My sisters and I through high school and like that would go down there to help with – sometimes with mailing of the papers, and things like that. Uh – maybe in college there’d be a day or two where I’d get to run the press if the regular pressman had to go out quickly and do something, but – you know, I never put the chases or anything on the press, or never fed paper through the press. I remember trying to learn the linotype during those days, and of course today, a lot – a lot of people don’t know what the linotype is or looks like –

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but the keyboard, entirely different from a typewriter, and I never could – never could master it. There’d be a lot of hunting and pecking and not fast enough to even put out enough type to do any good.

*Carlos Peterson:* Mm, and just really quickly, I want to touch back. You and Susan – Susan were the only two people on the sports staff at the time of the *Collegian*?

*Craig McNeal:* Yeah. That’s true, when I was sports editor, and of course then, next semester or whatever, I guess next year, because I would’ve been there for two years, I was news editor then, and that would’ve been the – the year that President Kennedy was shot.

*Carlos Peterson:* Mm-hmm. Then did you have a – a larger staff as the news editor?

*Craig McNeal:* You know, not really. Probably a couple three more and the –

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the overall editor of – excuse me – of the paper would write some stories and uh – but I don’t remember having a whole bunch of people helping.

*Carlos Peterson:* So, then it must – it must have been a pretty big scramble then, trying to find stories, uh *[audio breaks up]*, having smaller staffs.

*Craig McNeal:* Well, yeah. I think on the college campus you could always come up with a lot of stuff, but you just had to do a lot of it yourself, and I don’t – I have no idea. I guess, you know, you were working from – as – as a grad student with the undergraduate journalism students. And a lot of them weren’t to that point that it – they’d had Journalism 1 or 2, and – and really weren’t writing that good or someone you could send out and really do a story. You’d end up on some of them just doing it yourself.

*Carlos Peterson:* And then I wanted to touch on the, uh – the Council –

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Grove Swim Club, while you were an undergrad at, K-State. So how did you become so interested in – in – in swimming?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, my mother had graduated from K-State, was a PE teacher before she got married to Dad, loved swimming. She was really instrumental at one time in getting the first pool built – built here in Council Grove and started the Red Cross swimming program. Of course, by then, my sisters and I could all swim good anyway. And she ended up between -- being head of the Red Cross program and later a water aerobics program through the Red Cross, doing that for 52 years. And so anyway, by the time I was in high school, I was teaching some of the advanced swimming, Red Cross swimming lessons and all the lifeguard –

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lessons. Had never really seen a swim meet till the summer before I was at K-State, but I thought, “That looks kind of interesting.” Tried out for the team and made it and kind of – kind of went from there. I had some success at it, and a little bit of scholarship help, although back in those days if you weren’t a football or basketball player, you weren’t getting a full ride or anything like that, but books and tuition kind of made a difference.

*Carlos Peterson:* Mm. Yeah, and just to go over, some of the accomplishments, it says that you were a four-year letterman, a team captain, and you were a place winner in the big eight championships. I guess what – I guess what were some of those honors like?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, you know, I enjoyed the sport, any competition. I’d been in football, basketball, track, and golf in high school, and not good enough to ever play at the –

*[0:18:00]*

at the college level in anything. Maybe walk on in track or something, but – so I was glad – glad I went out for swimming and had a chance to excel a little bit. Got a lot of, of course, nice trips as you’d travel around what was then the Big 8 conference. And – and enjoyed that. I actually – well, I was trying to think. I would train a little bit in the summers back in the Council Grove pool, and by – I guess by the time the summer between my junior and senior college, level, I was training pretty serious there at home. And – and oh, there was a handful of kids that were there every day anyway, and they’d seen me after the pool closed, and were curious about competitive swimming.

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And they’d ask, “Hey, can we swim laps with you?” And I said, “Sure,” and that kind of developed into the Council Grove Swim Club then. And, if I remember, that first year had six kids, and I took them to one meet that summer, and through the years then ended up the – the most I ever had one year was 83. So – and we were pretty competitive in our league, and I started a – what we called the gold meet trips every other year. And – and through their fundraising efforts, then we would go all over the country. We made trips from Winnipeg, Canada, south to Texas, from California to Florida, and the Yellowstone National Park area –

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and – and, those towns, and then of course throughout the middle – Midwest and Kansas. So, something I enjoyed and – and even – even in later years when I was out of college, probably if I wasn’t doing that, I’d have volunteered to coach Little League, softball or baseball, or something.

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*Carlos Peterson:* Yeah, and then I guess just listening to it, did you ever consider pursuing it, swimming, like, beyond that? Uh – I’m not sure if there was any form of professionalism in swimming, but I know that there were definitely –

*Craig McNeal:* No, not there. I, of course, still would swim when I could just, you know, to keep in a little bit of shape and stuff, not for competition, although, probably about 10 years ago in Kansas, they have the Sunflower State Games and also the –

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Kansas Senior Olympics. And so, there were three or four years in there in the last 10 years I competed in one or both of those meets each year in Topeka. And of course, it’s by age group, and even when I was like 70 or whatever, you were in with the 70 to 74 age group and things like that. So, enjoyed that and competed well.

Of course, I was maybe swimming more than some of those older guys, but I was trying to think. Ten years ago, that might’ve been about the first or second year we went to the Sunflower State Games. They had the – the Swim Club had a 50-year reunion, and I wasn’t coaching all but the last 20 years of that, but uh – had a big turnout on a Saturday night for a picnic in the park. And ahead of time I had promoted the Sunflower State Games, and we had 40 of the old –

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swimmers back through the – the ages that entered. And so we had a lot of fun that Sunday at the Sunflower State Games, and out of the 40, I remember between all of us, we ended up winning 65 medals, so uh – a lot of fun there, and a lot of reminiscing and seeing some people I hadn’t for a long time.

*Carlos Peterson:* And – and just to, I guess, kind of come back to it, do you remember, I guess specifically who was a part of the Swim Club, like, in terms of like, names that come to mind?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, my, you know? I mean there’s still – still a lot of them around here. In fact, two of them that eventually worked for me at the *Council Grove Republican* and – and they would’ve been Christy Adams Jimerson and um –

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Becky Johnson Evans. And you know, I could go on forever on, just probably during those 30 years that I coached, oh, easily would’ve had, 1,000 different kids, I suppose, you know. Some of them would swim several years, some of them just a few, but if you took just different names, there could easily have been 1,000 of them.

[**Post-production addition:** What does it mean to you to have had an impact on so many people through the Swim Club?

It was something I wanted to do for the youth in the Council Grove area, introducing to them a competitive sport that had given me so many opportunities in college. We started with six members the first summer, and there were 83 the biggest year I coached the team. During my 30 years coaching the swim club, more than 1,000 youth ages 5-18 passed through the program. Besides making Council Grove known while we competed in meets from Florida to California, Canada to southern Texas, and throughout the Midwest, our special Gold Meet trips provided an opportunity for many of the swimmers to travel out of Kansas for the first time, or travel by airplane and train.]

*Carlos Peterson:* And – and then I guess now, moving on a little bit more, you completed military active duty as an officer. What years were you in the military?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I was in the Kansas National Guard for 10 years, probably, I’d say early ‘60s to early ‘70s without pinpointing exact, exact years. I had joined the National Guard unit here in Council Grove –

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when – when I first started out.

*Carlos Peterson:* What prompted you to join the military?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I think some of it would’ve been the interest because my dad served in the Army and in World War II, and as a real young boy, our family was with him at Fort Benning, Georgia. So you know, you’re on post, and you get to see some things that maybe today you couldn’t because of security, but I remember across the street from where we lived in the officers’ quarters was the paratrooper training area, and they had, like, three or four big, high towers. And I’d go across the street and sit there in the grass most days and watch those guys. They’d hook them up with a cable to the top of the parachute, and then they’d jump off the tower, and the cat – the cable, I guess, would give them that feeling –

*[0:25:00]*

of controlling the chute and landing without being injured and things. So, and at the time I joined the Guard, my best friend through high school and I, joined the unit here together at the same time. And after a year or two, then we both joined the Officer Candidate School that the Guard had here in Kansas, and both completed it and were commissioned then second lieutenants.

*Carlos Peterson:* What was the name of your friend?

*Craig McNeal:* I’m sorry, what’s that?

*Carlos Peterson:* What was the name of your friend?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, Hall, H-A-L-L, Moxley, M-O-X-L-E-Y, and he’s deceased now, uh –

*Carlos Peterson:* So, I – I guess then where – where did you two serve –

*[0:26:00]*

and then what did you do in your time of service?

*Craig McNeal:* Okay, when we went to basic training, it was at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. You had, of course, six months there. The basic training was eight weeks, and then you’d go into advanced individual training. Mine happened to be in company clerk type training, so once you completed eight weeks there, then you were in an actual company there on – on post. You know, working with a regular company clerk, but you ended up doing all the work. The only thing I really remember about that down there was it was just at the very start of the Vietnam War, and we were just starting to send people over, not to fight, but to train and things like that.

*[0:27:00]*

And the company I was with was a heavy equipment company, and so they were sending some of those people over there to train people, and also to do some work in construction and – and roads and things. And I remember they’d keep me over there in the headquarters till midnight or the wee hours of the morning to cut the orders. And then the sergeants and everything would go over to the barracks, wake these guys up, you know, half asleep, and get them to pack up and – and everything and then put them on a bus and get them off. They – they were having trouble with – at that – at that time they would call it going over the hill. These guys, if they knew ahead of time, were being sent to Vietnam, they’d disappear, and so this was a way they, uh –

*[0:28:00]*

kept them corralled and everything and made sure they got them to wherever they were getting on a plane or whatever to go on over to Vietnam. I always felt sorry for ‘em, but yet that was my job and duty was to cut those orders, and I didn’t have to go wake them up or any of that, but I had to start the process.

[**Post-production addition:** Did you ever think to speak up or question the process?

It was something the Army had to do because in those early days of the war, the U.S. was sending heavy equipment and personnel to Vietnam. There was a problem of soldiers going over the hill (just disappearing) when they knew in advance they were being shipped out. My only involvement was, as company clerk, to cut the official orders coming down the chain of command. You don't question your superiors.

What are your feelings on the war now?

I wonder sometimes why we become involved in wars and other actions around the world, particularly when many factions in the countries where we are fighting don't want us there. In Vietnam, we lost the war and the country to the Communists, in addition to thousands of American lives. When the wars are over, the U.S. has troops and equipment remaining in the countries for years - Korea for example, 65+ years later.]

*Carlos Peterson:* So, then you, yourself, were – were never sent over to Vietnam?

*Craig McNeal:* No, I wasn’t. Uh – once I got back to Council Grove and everything, eventually, my friend and I, like I said, both went through Officer Candidate School and were commissioned. I was assigned to the engineer battalion in Manhattan, Kansas, was the executive officer, and I can remember there, kind of an answer to your question, as company headquarters there, or battalion headquarters, we got the word that –

*[0:29:00]*

our battalion and our headquarters company that I was in was to be activated and sent to Vietnam. This was maybe a couple of weeks ahead of time, and you know, it wasn’t anything we really had put out to the enlisted men or anything yet. Never did know for sure what happened, but the day before our orders were to come down that the battalion was activated, somewhere in the Pentagon, they had changed their mind, cut those orders out and we never were called up. I don’t – I can’t remember if, uh – I know the war went on for a while after that, but I don’t remember if it was winding down at that stage or – or what, but they suddenly didn’t need our battalion.

[Post-production addition: How did you feel about that? Were you ready to go to Vietnam at the time?

I was executive officer of Headquarters Company, 891st Engineer Battalion, Kansas Army National Guard.  Companies in the battalion were involved in extensive training for the possibility of eventually being activated and sent to Vietnam. After being notified that the battalion was to be called to active duty, there was a last-minute change in orders. As for me, it was "duty calls" if I had to go. Other than having to leave the newspaper, I was single and with no children to leave at home, so it would have made it easier for me than some of the troops.]

*Carlos Peterson:* And then you said you were based in, at least with engineering, in Manhattan. Was that – I guess what specifically were you doing –

*[0:30:00]*

in terms of, I guess, your job? And – and when you were based there, were you just *[audio cuts out]* in training?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, it was in the headquarters company of the battalion and the executive officer would really have been the second in command under the commanding officer. So, you know, you had to occasionally conduct classes or different training and different things like that. A lot of paperwork, and – and so on. I, you know. You’d go to, uh – two weeks’ active duty in the summertime. I can remember going to Wisconsin one year and Minnesota one year, Wyoming, places like that for training and never was sent to Fort Riley. I always thought all the money we were wasting on gas –

*[0:31:00]*

and everything because you’d take every vehicle you had, all that heavy equipment, all that bridge building stuff, with you, but never – never were sent out to Fort Riley for anything.

*Carlos Peterson:* Did you enjoy the work?

*Craig McNeal:* Yeah. I really enjoyed it. I stayed in for 10 years, was a first lieutenant by then. I would’ve stayed in more. It would’ve been nice to get 20 and that retirement income on top of your regular job, but at that stage, I was going to have to go back to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, for some advanced officer training. And uh – I forget. It was for a year, maybe, but at that stage at the office, my dad was winding down a little bit [at age 65], and I could see where there were – I couldn’t – I couldn’t just pack up and leave for a year or anything

*[0:32:00]*

and leave him there to put out the *Council Grove Republican* five days a week by himself.

*Carlos Peterson:* So, then in return, I guess, what was it like then once you – you’re out of the military. You’re back in Council Grove. What was it like returning?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, you know, returning home really wasn’t like if we’d had been sent to Vietnam, for example, you know, where you’d come back and you’d been gone a couple years or whatever, or like when my dad got out of World War II and came home. That was a whole different thing. In my case, where I was at, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, those six months, you know, maybe a weekend a month you might get a couple of days at home. You could come back home on a weekend pass, so you know, it wasn’t like – it wasn’t like you had been away from your folks, or my sisters, or friends, you know, that I’d gone through high school with.

*[0:33:00]*

*Carlos Peterson:* Okay, and then, I guess moving on to occupational, choice. We had mentioned the military, and then did you go straight to working in the *Republican*, or did you work anywhere else before entering the media industry? If so, where?

*Craig McNeal:* Yeah. No, in – in media, I went straight to the *Council Grove Republican*, and by then, I would’ve been out of basic training and in Officer Candidate School because I was – the Officer Candidate School was while I was still in grad school. I’d have to go to Topeka, one weekend a month, and then you had to go to a two-week summer camp where they had the Officer Candidate School.

*Carlos Peterson:* And did you ever have any doubts –

*[0:34:00]*

or concerns about pursuing a journalism career?

*Craig McNeal:* No. Once I started it, from grad school on, really enjoyed it and realized that that was what I really wanted to do, and I had that business background then from my bachelor’s degree. I was, you know – I was trying to think. I think I had one other job offer a few years later from a paper that wanted me to – another one here in northeast Kansas wanted me to come up there and – and take the job as editor, but I, you know. By then I was definitely in down here and – and had a chance to buy out my dad’s partner, and eventually in years later then bought out my dad’s half and everything.

*Carlos Peterson:* Do you remember the – the name of the paper, that tried to hire you –

*[0:35:00]*

or offer you a job?

*Craig McNeal:* You know, to be honest, I don’t, and I’m not sure really. I’d want to say, although this many years later, whoever took the job I guess probably would be retired anyway, and uh – wouldn’t think, “Oh, I wasn’t first choice,” or something, you know? That’s whoever did take the job –

*Carlos Peterson:* And how did your family and – and friends react to your decision to become a journalist?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, my folks, I’m sure, were pleased. They never pushed me to start in journalism or to go back to grad school in journalism, but you know, just having a father as a newspaperman and an editor, seeing everything that he would go through in the late hours in covering different meetings and everything. Uh – I’m sure they were pleased, and finally I decided to – to go back into journalism.

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And probably the fact – and of course then, like I said, eventually going into partnership with my dad and things like that. I think some of my high school friends kind of always had the feeling that I’d end up in journalism, that you know, I had been on the paper staff in high school and stuff like that, and I think maybe for some reason gave them the impression that I was, you know, had a lot of fun with it and everything else.

*Carlos Peterson:* And then, at the time, entering into the field, were you single or married at the time?

*Craig McNeal:* I was single. when I came out of grad school and went to work at the paper, married a few years later [Lorna McNeal, now divorced], had two children, Mike McNeal and Marci McNeal, both of them now in Olathe.

*[0:37:00]*

*Carlos Peterson:* Well, Craig, I think we’re all done then. This is the end of part two.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Rachel Bundstein:* This is Rachel Bundstein. Today is Oct. 16, 2020. I am interviewing Craig McNeal of the *Council Grove* – Gro*ve Republican* for Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists Project. This is part three. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas, and the Kansas Press Association. What and where was your first journalism job?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, Rachel, it was the *Council Grove Republican*, here in Council Grove, Kansas.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What year was this?

*Craig McNeal:* 1965 when I would’ve started here.

*Rachel Bundstein:* How did you get your first journalism job?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, it was a family-owned newspaper. My dad had been here since 1935, 1936, and I just joined him in the business.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What was the media environment like at this time?

*[0:01:00]*

*Craig McNeal:* I started to say, too, once I started in ’65, up until the time I sold, I was with the paper for 52 years. And you ask about media environment, of course, small town. I think our current population is just slightly below – below, 2,100 – a daily paper, Monday through Friday. We were kind of the – all those years were the – kind of the voice of the community. No radio station or anything here, so –

*Rachel Bundstein:* And what was the journalism technology of this time?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, when I came to the paper, it was still the hot type. You’d – everything –

*[0:02:00]*

was set on the linotypes and – and went from there.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Describe what it was like to be a journalist during this time period?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, it certainly made the job a lot harder than it would be today. No cellphones, no digital cameras, no computers, I guess. You know, I’d sit down to write a story on the old manual typewriter, tear off the paper and take it back to the linotype where they would set it on the hot type. They would – they would make a proof of it, send it back up to be proofread. Corrections would be made and then it was ready to be put in the different, uh – columns, and the hot type would be put in the different columns in the chase that was being made up to go to the old Goss –

*[0:03:00]*

flatbed press.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What are your early memories of working at this job?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, probably really the same thing on just how much different it was then – what it would be today with all the modern equipment, with computers, for example, you know? You’d sit there. You’d type your story. You’d run it through spellcheck, and you could hit the button and it would go directly to the page, compared to all those extra steps would’ve been taken back in the hot type days.

[**Post-production addition: What are some of your other early memories?**

I had grown up hanging around the newspaper office, watching the staff operate the linotypes and the press runs.  In grade school, my sisters and I would help roll single wraps for mailing; and in high school, on Saturday mornings, I would melt the thousands of lead slugs from the week's pages in the kettle pot and use a large ladle to pour pigs the linotypes would need the next week. After college and during the early years on the staff, I would write most of the sports stories, general news reporting, and I would make a daily morning run to the county courthouse, city hall and the high school office for story material.  I also covered City Council meetings two nights a month (or more, with special meetings), with dad covering school board sessions.  He pulled rank and selected the school board coverage because he said they only met once a month.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* How many women did you work with and what sort of jobs did they have?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, really, through the years, the three that were there – actually, it would’ve been Becky Evans, Christy Jimerson, and Kay Roberts. They combined were with dad –

*[0:04:00]*

and I for more than 100 years, so they all started out young, and I guess enjoyed the job. None of them had any journalism training. They weren’t reporters. They didn’t write stories. Maybe – maybe Christy would write a wedding, for example. Kay became an expert on the Associated Press once you could capture it off of computers, instead of the old teletype days, and Becky would do the ad sales and ad makeup.

*Rachel Bundstein:* From what you saw not only at your own paper, but other experiences, what was it like being a woman journalist at this time?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, again, where – where I didn’t have any true journalists, I’m kind of remembering. It probably was slow for a woman –

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to break in as a reporter or an editor of say a large city paper, something like that where – where it would have more women starting out as a reporter on the staff.

*Rachel Bundstein:* How did your first journalism work affect your career in long term, or affect your understanding of journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course I stayed in the job here for 52 years until I sold the paper, and I felt like I could handle any type of story that came along from sports to city council, school board, county commission, deaths, murders, accidents, court reporting, whatever.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Who was the most influential person to you during your first journalism job?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, that first job and only job, and that would’ve been my dad, who between the two of us –

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had the paper for 82 years.

[**Post-production addition**: Talk more about what you learned about journalism from your father and how it influenced your own work.

While I received an excellent journalism education in graduate school, and as a staff member (sports editor, and then news editor) of the college newspaper, nothing can compare to joining the staff at the Council Grove Republican and having a mentor who already had 30 years experience publishing the small town daily newspaper -- my dad.  He allowed me to cover situations that many new staff members elsewhere would not have an opportunity to write about until they were more experienced, and with the good and sometimes bad output, allowed me to become a well-rounded journalist.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* Talk about how journalism technology evolved during your career?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, go back to like I mentioned, a minute ago. Started out in the hot type days, which I explained. Years later, the Compugraphic came along,which was a photographic type of process where, again, you would still write your stories on the old, manual typewriter,send the copy back to the gals that were on the Compugraphics. They would type in the story. It would print it out, on – on a strip of photograph paper, which ran through a developer, and you could make corrections –

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from there on that, and then you would run that strip through a waxer, and then were able to paste it on your makeup page, which then would go off to the printing plant, be photographed, put on negative, and from negative to the printing plate and then onto the press. And of course, from there, the computers came along and – there you could send your story back. And – and once it was corrected and everything, was just put directly on the page, which then would be e-mailed to the printing plant, and they could take it directly to a plate, and put it on the press.

*Rachel Bundstein:* In our research, we found an article from the *Lawrence Journal-World*. It said it was late 2003, and there was 1980s Macs still being used for publication.

*[0:08:00]*

Was this out of functionality or funding?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, maybe more functionality because when I went to the more modern Macs, we had the – had the money. I think we were just comfortable with the old Mac+ and the Mac SE. I still got two of them out in my garage that I could fire up if I needed to and – and look back at, something I’d saved or whatever, if I needed it. Eventually, went to the more modern Mac – Macintoshes as you’d see today, the big screens that – oh, gee, I don't know how Becky was able really to make up ads on the little Mac+, but she could do it.

[**Post-production addition:** What were the ads like from the old way of doing things to when you transitioned to the Mac’s?

The quality was the difference between night and day. The linotype and Ludlow type usually was not as crisp and you didn't have as many type styles to select from; and the artwork was nowhere as sharp and pleasing because you had to use a limited number of mats and cast with hot lead, compared to the thousands of images you can produce from the Mac's.  It also is so much faster to make up an advertisement on a computer, compared to the hot type days. One person can complete an adv. on the computer in short order, while the hot type process could have a linotype operator setting the type, another staff member casting the artwork, and still another might be hand setting the larger type for casting on the Ludlow and making up the adv. in the chase (page form).]

*Rachel Bundstein:* What was your involvement with actually printing the paper?

*[0:09:00]*

*Craig McNeal:* Well, early in my career I tried to learn – learn how to do the linotype, just in case we ever had somebody sick, or quit, or whatever, but never could master it. And – and if you’re familiar with a linotype keyboard at all, completely different from the typewriter, and even doing the old hunting and peck method, it’d take me forever just to set a paragraph. So, eventually I gave up on that. I did some job printing on the old, hand-fed Clapper press, and occasionally they’d trust me for a few minutes to run the big flatbed press if the pressman had to go back up front and get something or – or whatever.

*Rachel Bundstein:* You became half owner with your father by purchasing Jack Lawrence’s half interest in 1975.

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What was it like being part owner with your father? Did the dynamic or relationship with your father change once you became a co-owner?

*Craig McNeal:* No, it really didn’t. We got along fine, and no problems. I – I think we each had our own responsibilities and a busy day trying to put out a small daily paper. You didn’t have much time to argue or question what he was doing, or vice versa.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Did you have to defer decisions to him with him being your dad?

*Craig McNeal:* I’m sorry? What was that again?

*Rachel Bundstein:* Did you have to defer decisions to him with him being your father?

*Craig McNeal:* No. No. We never had any problems.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Who were some of your key employees over the years?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, well, of course, well, other than that, Dad and I, it was just the three women that I mentioned a while ago that were with us, combined, more than 100 years.

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Prior to that you’d have, you know, maybe one or two, or somebody different. Way back when I first started, we had a man that I guess we called the sports editor and advertising manager, but he went on to the *Topeka Capital*, and from there, Dad and I just covered what he did, and of course I did all the sports anyway after that. And then of course trained the three women that I mentioned, you know, into some of the things they could do to take a little pressure off of Dad and me.

*Rachel Bundstein:* You and your father had a policy for the *Republican.* That was, carry all the news, but do it in a kind way. What does this mean and why is it important?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, again, small town, we made sure that we had the facts right and published them correctly. We never –

*[0:12:00]*

never covered anything up or left something out and didn’t print it, even if they were good friends. A few times we’d even get offers from somebody. I had a high school kid that came in one day that’d been picked up for speeding. He didn’t – didn’t want his dad to know about it, and of course we published all the court records

And I remember he wanted to pay me $50 to keep it out, but it got in there. And I – I think I maybe even moved it up the list to the first item in the list of speeding tickets. And one year I remember we lost an advertiser over printing a story of one of his court convictions, but you know, that was our policy. We did it in a kind way, just the facts.

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But he pulled the advertising and never did – never did get it back, although he’s a good friend today.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Why is it important to have a daily newspaper, rather than a weekly for the small community – a small community?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, there’s no radio station here, and there were no other newspapers that really came in and covered the community unless there was something super major, you know? So we really didn’t have any competition for the news, and – like I think I mentioned before, we were like the voice of the community and the way people could get things their clubs or organizations were doing, and of course we were covering school activities and sports and city council, school board, county commission –

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things like that.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Were there any specific instances where another paper or news agency would come in and cover something in your town?

*Craig McNeal:* Not too often. I was trying to think – oh, you know, we have a big historical celebration here in June, and occasionally you might see a photographer maybe from an Emporia or Manhattan paper just taking pictures, but I really can’t think of any major stories that, well, I’m trying to think. The – well, I think we had one instance where our sheriff had left a tape in a video – rented video camera, and when it was returned, it ended up getting on the internet –

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and going around the world. So, we got a little TV and – and larger newspaper coverage on that, where people would – they’d send people into town to interview and everything.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What was the cost of a subscription to your paper?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, my. 1965, Rachel, honestly, I don't remember. I remember classified ads were three lines, three times, three dimes, so you could run your three-line classified, for sale or whatever, three days for 30 cents. Today it’s probably 30-some cents a word.

*Rachel Bundstein:* You became sole owner when you bought your father’s interest in 1985. What was it like becoming sole owner of the paper?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I still did the same thing –

*[0:16:00]*

same amount of work. Uh *[laughs]*, the only – only difference I can think of, it was now I was the one signing the checks and not my dad.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What was it like dealing with different events around town from local officials to run-of-the-mill – run-of-the-mill townies.

*Craig McNeal:* Well, we didn’t have any problems, and of course, at that stage in 1985, when I was the sole owner, Dad was still working for me, so we’d have the same team. We had the same three women on staff, and things didn’t really change a lot. Coverage remained the same, and our philosophy remained the same.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Did you ever have offers from other owners to buy the paper throughout your career?

*Craig McNeal:* I can remember once. It would’ve been the Montgomerys that had the Junction City paper and – and others, I think, one out in western Kansas –

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and whatever, but you know, at the time, Dad and I are – or yeah. I think that was back when we were both – had half the paper. We weren’t interested in selling or retiring, and of course I wasn’t that old, even that – I wasn’t interested in looking for another job somewhere.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Do you remember about when that was that you had the offer?

*Craig McNeal:* I’m just going to guess in the, mmm, maybe early ‘80s.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Okay. What is the proudest moment of your career?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, I think the things I -- kind of highlights to me were the successes of our high school sports teams –

*[0:18:00]*

you know, when you get to follow them to state tournament and they would do well, or maybe win the state and things like that. and maybe that goes back a little bit to my time as – in grad school as sports editor of the Kansas State *Collegian*.

[**Post-production addition**: Were there any teams that stick out in your memory?

In my first few years on the Council Grove Republican staff, I covered the Dwight Rockets, a high school of 73 students in the north part of our county. The 1965 football team won the Class BB mythical state championship (days before the current playoff system) after they finished their regular season 8-0 and second in the *Kansas* *City Star* Class BB rankings. When it was noted both the No. 1 ranked and also 8-0 team (sorry, I forget the name of the school) and Dwight could play a nine-game schedule, a contest was added to end the season, with Dwight winning 100-6 in the wildest game I ever covered.

Dwight would go on to win the 1965-66 Class BB state basketball tournament with a 26-0 record. This team, years later, was inducted into the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame. The Rockets would come back in the1966-67 season to repeat as state champs, finishing with a 25-2 record (both losses to large city schools in the Dodge City Tournament of Champions.

I also had the opportunity to cover Council Grove High School, including the Lady Braves 1984 Class 4A state volleyball championship. The top boys finish was third in the 1979-80 Class 4A state basketball tournament, posting a 21-4 record (the star player on that team was Gary Carrier who went on to earn NAIA All-American honors at Washburn University). The girls also placed fourth in the 1983-84 Class 4A state basketball tourney.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* What are some of your favorite stories or moments from your career?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, again, sports stories, when we had successful teams. I always remembered through the years the bond issue fights and when – when we’d finally passed the bond issue for a new school or new swimming pool. A new county courthouse I guess we would’ve at one time –

*Rachel Bundstein:* What were the most difficult moments in your career?

*[0:19:00]*

*Craig McNeal:* Probably when, oh, like you’d have friends in court. And of course, I would go through the courthouse each day and pick up which cases were filed and finalized. I wouldn’t sit in on cases unless – I think I can remember during my career two murder trials that I did cover in person. But anyway, you’d have friends in court, and you know, it was kind of tough to cover it, but – but you did it, and you did it fair and – and kind of went on from there.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What colleague or editor had the biggest influence on you?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, definitely my dad with his long journalism history, and then when I was in grad school, my adviser was the late Jack Backer, and he was really encouraging and –

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you know, I ended up being a journalism assistant under him, so I got to help him in a lot of classes, and we’d share things back and forth. And I could challenge him and teach him a few things and vice versa.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What are your memories of attending KPA conventions?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, in the earlier days, I didn’t get to the convention because Dad was active on the board. He was a president of the KPA, so I’d be back at home putting out the paper, but oh, a couple things that popped in my mind. I remember the sessions on computers in the early days and taking a lot of notes, saving them, and that’s what gave me the confidence and everything when we first switched to the Mac+ and the Mac SE. later then.

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I got a lot out of the digital photography sessions, and of course, eventually, you know, switched to a digital camera. We had started out -- when I first came on the paper, we were using a black and white Polaroid camera. And then you’d have to take that photograph and have a plastic engraving made. And then it would paste onto a type -- high block of wood and go in the page with all the hot type, and then of course, print the photo in the paper. But digital photography really has made a big difference in newspaper publishing.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What do you see as the biggest moments in Kansas – Kansas journalism history?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I don't know necessarily just Kansas. When you think nationally –

*[0:22:00]*

as far as big, big stories that we would carry from a state or national, level – the end of war – World War II, Vietnam, Korea, uh – probably the election of Dwight Eisenhower as president of the United States. I can think of the moon landing time. The President Kennedy assassination, and of course I was on the *Collegian* staff at K-State when that happened.

[**Post-production addition:** What do you remember of Eisenhower’s election to the presidency?

I was in junior high and remember he was a general and military hero from Abilene, Kansas. I was able to obtain a large number of the small (quarter size) "I Like Ike" campaign buttons, which I arranged on the back of my jacket to spell the campaign slogan. I wore it in the big welcome home parade in Abilene, resulting in several newspaper photos. At the end of his life, I had the honor of being a Kansas National Guard officer leading a squad serving as security during Ike's funeral at the Eisenhower Presidential Center in Abilene.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* Who do you think were the most influential people in Kansas journalism history and why?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, the name that pops in my head right now would be William Allen White, the *Emporia Gazette*, and he was the most famous one that I can remember names of and – and uh – had done so much for Kansas, and his contacts with –

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Congress and Washington, D.C., and – and getting some things done for Kansas.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Did you belong to any other professional news organizations? Which ones and why?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, at K-State I was inducted into Sigma Delta Chi. I think that name has changed today, and I don’t remember what it’s called now [Society of Professional Journalists]. That was when I was in grad school. Of course, I remember the Kansas Press Association, and we were a member of the Associated Press, but, of course, the KPA. That really was an organization that could do so much for individual papers. Their ad service that could bring in ads from outside that we would never be able to contact people or even know about them.

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And of course, the Associated Press on what we would use together, the state, national, and international news.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Was there ever a particular moment early in your career where you realized, “I’m a real journalist now”?

*Craig McNeal:* I’m going to say probably that very first day on the job here when the paper came rolling off the press. You could pick up a copy, and look at it, and see all the stories you’d written, and know, “Hey, this is for real.”

*Rachel Bundstein:* Have you ever considered quitting journalism or doing something else?

*Craig McNeal:* No.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What significant events or turning points in your personal life occurred during your years as a journalist, and did they impact your career at all?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, during all those years, I was divorced. Maybe part of that was the 60, 70 hours a week and a lot of nights you were out on the job covering something.

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But, uh – no, it really didn’t impact my career because you had to get up and – and publish a paper the next day and go on.

*Rachel Bundstein:* So, you won the – several awards for your sports writing. What did that mean to you?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, as – I can think of three of them: the Oscar Stauffer Sportswriter Award; Sportswriter of the Year Award from the Athletic Director Administrators Association, state-wise; and the Kansas Basketball Coaches Association Media Award. Well, it was definitely an honor. I think it was probably for writing and fair coverage of the different sports and certainly support of local –

*[0:26:00]*

high school athletics. Probably the most meaningful one there would be [was] the Oscar Stauffer Sportswriter Award, which I guess they all were open state-wise, but the usual winners of the Oscar Stauffer one are sports editors, sports reporters at major newspapers in the state.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Do you remember what specifically you were being awarded for? Like, was there a specific piece?

*Craig McNeal:* No. I think it was general, general coverage over a season.

[**Post-production addition:** Is there a particular piece that you’ve written in your career that sticks out to you in terms of sports coverage?

Besides the Dwight and Council Grove state tournament appearances, particularly the three championships, when I was sports editor of the Kansas State *Collegian*, I covered one of the Wildcats' trips to the NCAA Final Four basketball tourney.

Twenty-five years ago, I discovered that fall would be the 100th season of football at Council Grove High School, and spent considerable time researching newspaper articles and school yearbooks to write a story that included early-year games on a dirt field in the park, duck cloth uniforms made by local women, top teams during the years, etc.  This fall was the125th season and I updated the story with additional information, and it was published in the local newspaper prior to the first contest.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* And you were twice named Citizen of the Year by the Council Grove/Morris County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, and on two other occasions, you were presented a key to the city by Council Grove mayors. Why were you named Citizen of the Year, and how – what prompted the two keys to the city, and how did that make you feel?

*Craig McNeal:* You know, Rachel, to be honest, I *[laughs]* –

*[0:27:00]*

I’m not sure I can remember. I know at least one of them was linked with service to the community at one time. Another one I can remember it – and it might’ve involved both Citizen of the Year and uh – later a key to the city was – I was on a committee to plan and develop a new swimming pool here. This would’ve been like, uh,oh, four or five years ago, and we were really fighting that because we didn’t think a bond issue could pass for the amount it was going to take, and I did some research and stumbled onto the fact that there was a new state law that allowed sales tax revenue to be used for swimming pools. And that was – that made it a whole different ballgame because –

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as a committee, we approved that, the city council bought it, and the bond issue passed easy. And of course, now, probably half of that annual amount that goes to pay off the bonds comes from sales tax revenue outside of Council Grove, particularly where we’re a real historical tourist type town and get a lot of traffic through staying in the hotel and eating at the restaurant and things like that.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Do you remember, uh – oops, sorry.

*Craig McNeal:* I think on that later – later one, that included the pool, I think – I think I got a key to the city when we were early in the game from the mayor, and I – at the time I had made a –

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$100,000 matching grant thing that I would provide up to $100,000 towards the pool if particularly former members of the Swim Club I coached would come out and make a pledge of any amount, and I would match it. We ended up in that program -- that ended up with my $100,000 in there – we ended up with a little over $300,000.It allowed us to expand the pool to eight lanes instead of six, and add a diving area as well. That wasn’t in the original plan. The insurance people had discouraged the city from including a diving area in the project. And then I think maybe one of the Citizens of the Year Award –

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was a year or two later, when the pool was finished and open. I received that from the Chamber of Commerce (after serving 27 years on the board of directors).

*Rachel Bundstein:* You talked about your swim club. You coached swimming for 30 years with young swimmers competing in the Amateur Athletic Union and the United States Swimming meets from Orlando, Florida to Los Angeles, California, and southern Texas to Canada, as well as throughout the Midwest. Council Grove hosted meets that drew more than 1,000 swimmers and family members each summer. Why was it important to you to be involved with swimming for so long?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, it was a hobby based on my background as a swimmer at Kansas State University. It was a volunteer type thing. I mean, I think if I hadn’t of started the swim team here and coached it for the first 30 years, that I probably would have volunteered to coach Little League –

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baseball or softball or something like that. The swim meets, both our league dual meets, which would be on a weeknight or Saturday morning, plus the big weekend meet you mentioned that drew the 1,000 swimmers and family members was a definite economic benefit for the community because even if they were close around and drove home. It was just an all-day Saturday, all-day Sunday meet. Even if they drove home for the night and back, they were buying gas here, there was food. A lot of them were staying here in the hotel/motels or even camping out in the park where the swimming pool is located.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Once you moved to – into coaching swimming, did that take away from your responsibilities at the paper? How did you balance the two?

*Craig McNeal:* No, it really didn’t take anything away, other than it made *[laughs]* – made for a longer day.

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I would, uh – we had two practices a day. One of them was at 6 a.m., so had time to go home and grab a bite to eat and get to work by 7:30 or usually 8, probably, and then would have another practice at 5 in the evening. So, there were – were some evenings I would rush then from the evening practice to a city council or school board meeting to cover those.

*Rachel Bundstein:* Did you ever consider taking coaching on full time?

*Craig McNeal:* No. No. It was strictly a hobby, volunteer sort of thing.

*Rachel Bundstein:* You won the National Outstanding Service Award from the United States Swimming. What did that mean to you?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, that was a special award. There’s 12, or at the time that was at – an Amateur Athletic Union award –

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and there were 12 regions in the United States, and there was only one award winner in each of those regions, so I would’ve been one of the 12 recipients that year.

*Rachel Bundstein:* You’re a member of the Rotary Club. What do you do as part of that, and what impact do you think you’ve had on the community with it?

*Craig McNeal:* Now back – back on the swimming. Oh, the Rotary. Yeah, well, I – I’m sorry. Well, I was president of the club one year, but the Rotary Club here in Council Grove is the dominant civic organization, major fundraising projects through the years and –and then turning that money into community parks –

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and playgrounds and other events and activities.

**[Post-production addition:** Why was it so important to you to be so involved and volunteer with all of these activities?

Newspapers are among the leaders in a community, particularly in a small town. I became involved early, serving as president of the Chamber of Commerce before I was 30, served on the three-member Council Grove Housing Authority that obtained federal funding for a senior citizen housing project, still am active in the Rotary Club that has done so much through the years to promote Council Grove and raise funds for various community projects, was a member of the committee that made it possible for the Council Grove Life Center (fitness center), was involved in efforts to pass bond issues for construction of swimming pools 50+ years apart (the latest a state-of-the-art aquatic center), and started the age group competitive swimming program and coached the team for 30 years.]

*Rachel Bundstein:* What did it mean to be named to the Kansas Press Association Hall of Fame?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, that was extra special, probably the most favorite of them all and that’d be considering that Dad had been inducted into the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame earlier, you know? I think it was 10 years or so before I received it, and again that’s an induction into that is something – you’re nominated and selected by the past presidents of the KPA.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What prompted your decision to retire from journalism back in 2017?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, one day at the office I got a call from a newspaper broker. Said she had somebody interested in buying the *Republican*, and I remembered my answer to her was –

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“You know, I’ve never considered selling the paper. Really not interested.” And that was kind of it. A couple weeks later, she – the broker called back and said, you know, “This individual is really interested, has always wanted to get back up into the Council Grove area.”

He [David Parker, a resident of Oklahoma when I sold the newspaper to him on July 1, 2017, and he since has moved to Salina] – he was living in Oklahoma then, and could he come up on a Saturday morning and just visit with me? So, he came up the following Saturday morning. We visited. I still explained the same thing. I really had never thought of selling. He threw out some figures, which were low by my estimations, and so that was kind of the end of it until the broker got back again in another week. And he was willing to pay –

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considerably more, and at that time, I think I sat down and thought – at that time I would’ve been, what, 77 years old? And I thought, “You know, I’m not getting any younger, and I’m probably, I definitely was typing slower.” I remember that, and probably an opportunity to sell doesn’t come along just every day, certainly no one local or anything. So, I got back with her and said, “Okay. Let’s do it.” And between she and my attorney here in town and everything took care of all the paperwork, and we finalized the sale.

*Rachel Bundstein:* How difficult – difficult was it to sell the paper to someone else after your family’s legacy there dating back to the 1930s?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, when the family is – has it for 82 years –

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out of the, um – at that time would’ve been 82 out of the 145 years the paper was in existence, it was really tough. It was a tough decision to go through this roughly a month back and forth with the owner and the broker and all that. It definitely was a sad time. I’m sure there were a few tears, and I – I remember after the paper was in new hands and everything, I had to keep telling myself to back off. Probably, uh – don’t offer any help, or suggestions, or criticism to the owner or the editor unless they ask for advice, and it’s worked out well, I think, you know? And as the months went along, you –

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of course, you’re still a subscriber to the paper, and oh, there’s times, you know, you think, “I would’ve done this story a little different or whatever,” but that’s in the past now.

*Rachel Bundstein:* What did your subscribers mean to you over the years?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, certainly, the support they gave both Dad and I over all those years, the compliments, you know? And you know, you’d get a certain amount of constructive criticism that you’d take to heart and – and consider. And maybe you’d still do it the same way, and maybe you’d change things a little bit. But uh – we always had good support from subscribers and both with their subscriptions, advertising, and news sources, and things like that.

[**Post-production addition:** Is there any constructive criticism that sticks out to you over the years?

The criticisms probably were more complaints or threats. I remember the time 60 years ago when I was speaking before a local organization to promote a new swimming pool bond issue, explaining that the pool would be located in the city park on the east side of town (those were the days when some residents looked down on those living east of the river). A man in the audience shouted out that "it will be a cold day in hell when you build a pool on the east side." The bond issue was approved, and 50+ years later when there was a bond issue to replace the old pool, the proposal passed, and the new aquatic center also is located in the park east of the river.

Another incident I remember was when I wrote a story on a situation where in planning by the Corps of Engineers for the federal reservoir north of the city, several of the outhouses ended up in four feet of water when the lake was above normal pool level (not an appealing situation for boating and swimming). A county rancher who had a feed lot in an area, where it was possible that run-off could drain into the reservoir, called after the story was published to tell me it would be my fault if the government forced him to shut down his feed lot operation, resulting in a loss of income.

When I was serving on the Council Grove Housing Authority to develop a high-rise senior citizens housing project in the city, a very successful local man who owned rental property in the city called and threatened to start a radio station here and run the newspaper out of business if the senior citizen project proceeded. Note: The housing project was completed, and there never has been a radio station in Council Grove.]

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*Rachel Bundstein:* Okay. This is the end of part three.

*[End of Audio]*

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*Kara Daneck:* This is Kara Daneck. Today is Oct. 16, 2020. I’m interviewing Craig McNeal of the *Council Grove Republican* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists Project. This is part four. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID pandemic.

This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association.

What was the newsroom environment like at the places you worked? How did men in the newsroom treat women journalists throughout your career? How did men outside of the newsroom treat women journalists throughout your career?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, Kara, of course I was at the *Council Grove Republican* my whole career, 52 years. I’m trying to think. Basically, we had three women on the staff, none of them journalism graduates and none of them reporters, but you know, the three of them worked well with my Dad and I, and –

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we were able to train them to – one of them would write the weddings; and one of them was strictly ad sales and makeup; and another one mastered the Associated Press wire once it was on computer and everything, so she could kind of handle some of those stories for us.My probably favorite story on women journalists goes back to when I was in grad school at Kansas State. I was sports editor of the *Collegian* one year, and we didn’t have a lot of students that were on the staff. So, I did most of the sports writing as a sports editor, and I had one young lady that was a journalism undergraduate that kind of was interested in sports. So, I kind of took her under –

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my wing and – and let her do a few stories like that, but the favorite one was that in K-State’s old Memorial Stadium press box, it was strictly a men’s club, you might say. I mean one, there wasn’t that many women journalists doing sports maybe, but two, those big city sportswriters and everything, they didn’t want really women up there. I mean they were kind of a cigar smoking, foul language group at times – at times, and they were just happy that it was men-only. Well, somewhere in there both the young lady and I decided, you know, something should be done about that. So, I went to the athletic director, explained that I wanted to take her up there with me for a game, let her cover the atmosphere and everything while I did the game story. Well, that kinda –

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drug around a while. Again, the men up there didn’t want that, but finally, we set it up so she could go up with me, and the men were well behaved. And I think it probably did them good to finally clean up the air a little bit and uh – they didn’t mind me bringing her back a time or two. And she did a story on what it was like up there, and what everybody did, and what their deadlines were, and everything.

*Kara Daneck:* What were career advancement options like for women during your career, not necessarily at your – not necessarily at your paper, but any that you observed?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I’m just going to say probably in those early days, the advancement options for women were not good, and again, I’m – I’m not basing it on our paper, but just you know, knowing other papers around the state and everything.

[**Post-production addition:** Could you elaborate on how they we’re not great or give any specifics if you could?

It was a man's world in the early days, not only in journalism, but in most businesses. Things are much better today, but salaries still are not equal in several careers. Look at the number of women providing television news and sports, as well as staff members at Kansas newspapers. There are women newspaper owners and editors, and women have served as president of the Kansas Press Association.]

*Kara Daneck:* What do women bring to journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, today I think probably knowledge –

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and definitely good writing skills, and you know, they’re coming out of journalism schools well-trained and have experience and are doing well.

*Kara Daneck:* How do you view the state of women in journalism today?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, there’s definitely probably more women on newspaper staffs around the state, in the nation than when I started, and – and you know, if you look around, there’s definitely a lot today, a lot of women that own the paper or an editor on the newspaper, so there’s definitely been advancement.

*Kara Daneck:* What was it like trying to balance home and work during your career?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, in my dad and I – in my case, you easily had 60 to 70-hour weeks, again, putting out a small daily, Monday through Friday –

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paper in a town of roughly 2,100 people. But I was pretty well able to balance some of that, trying to get to all the activities of my son and daughter. And since one of the things I did, besides covering most of everything for the paper, was the sports, no matter what it was, so with both the son and daughter involved in sports, we were going in town, out of town to those activities as a family. And I was able to do my job and still be a father and watch my kids play.

[**Post-production addition:** Were your children involved in the newspaper’s operations at all?

Not much. I would draft my son and daughter to go with me when weather (snow drifts, etc.) made it impossible for a newspaper carrier to reach all the houses on their route, my son and a friend shared a paper route one year in grade school to earn money for a swim club Gold Meet trip out of state, and both my son and daughter had stints in high school and college driving round-trip to the printing plant to pick up the daily papers.]

*Kara Daneck:* How did you gain confidence in your ability to be a journalist/work in the media industry?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, from the very start here, I had always covered everything. not just specializing –

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on the court, or sports, or obituaries, or whatever you would on a large city paper. So – so I felt like no matter what came along, I could handle the story and – and comfortably do it and write it.

*Kara Daneck:* How would you define a successful career in journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* You have to like the job *[laughs]*, and you definitely would have to gain early the respect of your community, particularly small-town newspapers.

*Kara Daneck:* What qualities did you think are the most important ones for career advancement in journalism?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, number one would have to be your writing skills. You definitely have to be fair and impartial in covering a story and writing it. And I think it’s very important that you’re active in the community, whether it’s your church –

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or clubs, or whatever.

*Kara Daneck:* How has journalism changed since you entered the field both in terms of technology and content?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, of course when I started, it was the manual typewriter. By the time I sold the paper, two and a half years ago, naturally it was all computers. Oh, I’m trying to think. Um – I don't know, maybe today, I think some papers, when you read a story, they don’t go into the full details like I would like to see. And – and of course we’re seeing some partiality, particularly, radio and TV, that’s not fair and – and not – it’s not impartial.

*Kara Daneck:* What are your thoughts on the state of journalism today from both a national and state perspective?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh my.

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I think, no matter what type of a paper you’re on, large or small, you need to tell the story in a fair and accurate manner. You need to present all the facts, be – and be informative. Make it interesting.

*Kara Daneck:* What do you think should be the mission of media today? What is the media’s role in democracy?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, maybe, uh *[laughs]*, maybe the same answers I just gave you about the telling the whole story and being fair and accurate. Present the facts, be informed – informative, be educational.

*Kara Daneck:* What do you see as the future of media? How long do you think newspapers will be around?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I hope there’s a lot of good years remaining. Even though I’m out of the business, I know today businesses, even if it’s not a newspaper, are facing a lot of challenges.

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As far as newspapers, when the internet came along, that took some of our advertising revenue, which – which hurt. And today on the internet, the news isn’t always accurate and fair. Just unbelievable the stuff you can read on there that you know there’s no truth at all. I mean where do they come up with that stuff?

*Kara Daneck:* What do you want your media outlet to be known for?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, I would hope the *Council Grove Republican* is remembered and known by – we were a voice of the community, a promoter and supporter of the community, and – and definitely, at least in my dad and my case, providing leadership in the community.

*Kara Daneck:* How do you want to be remembered?

*Craig McNeal:* Oh, as an owner/editor –

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who put in the long hours to provide the daily newspaper here. I always tried to present the news in a fair and impartial way. I think maybe the things I’m most proud of would be that about 30 years ago, Council Grove was one of the four smallest cities in the United States, that’d be population-wise, to have a daily newspaper. Today, of those four, the other three are weeklies, we’re the only daily, and I’m guessing there’s no town, population-wise, smaller than 2,100 today that has a daily paper, so we may be the only one. Also of course, I’m proud that the McNeal family published the *Council Grove Republican* for 82 years –

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out of the – today it's 148 years old, and I was involved in publishing the paper those last 52 years.

*Kara Daneck:* Craig, is there anything else you would like to talk about?

*Craig McNeal:* Well, no. In these interviews, we’ve covered a lot of ground and – and I’ve tried to present kind of the – the story from, again, this small-town paper, you know, whether it be a weekly, they have a lot of the same problems and things we would, but tried to present all of that to give people an idea of just what it’s like if you’re living in the big city and used to getting that paper every day and having many more pages than we’d have in an issue of the *Republican.*

*Kara Daneck:* Okay. This is the conclusion of this oral history.

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*[End of Audio]*