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*Genna Foster:* This is Genna Foster. Today is Oct. 1, 2020, and I am interviewing Linda Denning of the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists project. This is Part 1 and 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. And the first question is when and where were you born?

*Linda Denning:* I was born April 8, 1949, in Kansas City, Missouri.

*Genna Foster:* Is this the same town where you grew up?

*Linda Denning:* No, no. I grew up in a small town in Bluffton Indiana. I was actually – my parents – I was actually adopted.

*Genna Foster:* Oh, okay. So then who – so who were your parents and what did they do for a living?

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*Linda Denning:* Ralph and Veora, and it's V-E-O-R-A, Mowery, and my father was a farmer, and my mother didn't actually have a title, but she worked very hard as those farm wives do.

*Genna Foster:* What influence did your parents have on your life?

*Linda Denning:* I'm sorry, would you say it again?

*Genna Foster:* What influence did your parents have on your life?

*Linda Denning:* Oh, wow. My dad, I don't know if he always wanted a boy and there was only a girl available, but he always –

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like, I remember one of my earliest memories is he – Indiana, where I grew up, we had a big tomato industry, and he took one of the baskets that we would normally put tomatoes in and he put it on the side of the barn and that was my basketball goal and that's what my dad and I did, you know, to kind of have some time together or we would watch baseball on Sunday afternoons.   
  
So, looking back at that, I think he got me interested in a lot of things that maybe I wouldn't have been interested in otherwise as a girl. I mean I didn't play with dolls a lot. I didn't –

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have tea parties. I was out at the barn playing basketball with my tomato crates. So, um –.  
  
And my mother was pretty traditional except, like I said, she worked so hard. One of my earliest memories of my mother is we had a dairy and my mother running – she never walked anywhere, she ran everywhere because she had so much to do, it seemed like at the time. Anyway, I think hard work.  
  
And my dad, like I said, I think – I don't know if it was conscious, but I think my dad really taught me that you could do whatever you wanted to do, that, you know, you didn't have to be confined by what was expected of you.

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*Genna Foster:* Did you have any brothers or sisters, and then if you did, what were their professions?

*Linda Denning:* No, no brothers or sisters.

*Genna Foster:* And then is there anyone else in your family or extended family who worked in journalism?

*Linda Denning:* No.

*Genna Foster:* How would you describe your family's expectations for you when you were growing up?

*Linda Denning:* You know, I don't think my mother had a lot of expectations. I mean, she just enjoyed being a mother. My dad, on the other hand, was a bit of a perfectionist and as I look at my staff and the way that I have kind of been over the years, I think I probably picked that up from him.

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You know, it – I just lost my train of thought. What was the question again?

*Genna Foster:* How would you describe your family's expectations for you when you were growing up?

*Linda Denning:* Yeah, I'm sorry. I tend to wander sometimes, yeah. More so from my dad than my mom. My dad expected me to basically – if you're gonna do something, you do it well, end of story, and that way you don't have to do it a second time. And that's something I've tried to teach my kids, too, and I know I've had not total success with that but it's probably a good rule to live by.

*Genna Foster:* Did you ever feel pressured by your family to act or believe a certain way?

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*Linda Denning:* I didn't so much when I was growing up. I think about a situation when I -- the first time I took my soon-to-be husband home to meet my parents. My folks had a place out at the lake, and we had gone up to the lake and it was during the Democratic convention that year. And, anyway, we were all talking, and my dad kinda got this odd look on his face and kinda gave me the sign that I needed to step over and he wanted to say something and he didn't want –

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Pete to hear it, my fiancé to hear it.  
  
And, so as I got up, my dad said, “I want you to be honest with me” and I – my husband was Catholic and we were pretty liberal Lutherans so I thought that my dad was gonna say something like he's Catholic, isn't he, but he said, “He's a Democrat, isn't he?” and that just really stunned me because I – you know, Dad – I remember Dad telling me why he voted for Barry Goldwater in '64, but he never really pushed me one way or the other. But, yeah, he was quite taken back by the fact that we had a Democrat or would soon have a Democrat in the family.

*Genna Foster:* And then to talk about your childhood and your adoption –

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can you just kind of, when were you adopted and how that kind of has shaped growing up?

*Linda Denning:* Well, it's really kind of odd. Apparently – and I found this out much later -- there were two orphanages. I don't know if that's -- orphanages is the right word, but, in Kansas City, there was a Catholic home for mothers on one side of the depot and then there was the non-Catholic home for mothers on the other side. I was born in the non-Catholic side [The Willows]. And my mother-in-law [Winnie Denning, born in 1922], the woman who eventually became my mother-in-law, was actually born on the Catholic side. So that was kind of an interesting thing.

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But my parents adopted me. They went to Kansas City and picked me up and took me home. And this is something I've thought about over the years, too, because, when I worked for the *Salina Journal,* I did a series on unwed mothers and what their options were. And one of the stories obviously was on adoption and I was stunned to talk to some of these women that had been adopted, women and men who had been adopted. They were so bitter, and I – that was not my experience.  
  
I mean, I don't remember a time not knowing that I wasn't adopted, but my parents framed that –

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in such a way that, you know, it made me feel special, it didn't make me feel like I had been rejected at any point. And my parents handled – like most kids and their parents, we had our issues over the years, but they – that is one thing they handled so well and even in – I remember in grade school some of my friends would – 'cause again we lived in a small rural community, so everybody knew. I mean it wasn't like it was a huge secret. And some of my friends would take me aside and like break the news to me that I was adopted and I just – I don't know, the whole thing was just kind of yeah. Like I said, my parents handled it very well and –

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I don't think I've had any lasting problems because of it. I just – my parents are my parents. I've never thought of them as my adopted parents, as my foster parents. They're just my parents.

*Genna Foster:* What was your hometown like when you were growing up there?

*Linda Denning:* I'm not quite sure how to – we were kind of split between – when I was really young, we were kind of split between two towns because we lived out in the country. So, one town was probably less – fewer than 1,000 people [Liberty Center]; the other town [Bluffton] was probably closer to 10,000.

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The town that probably had the most influence on me, that I had the most contact with as I was growing up was Liberty Center, which was the smaller town, and my aunt and uncle [Kathryn and Willis Elston] had a grocery store in Liberty Center. And the main activity for people in Liberty Center seemed to be talking about other residents of Liberty Center, and we would go down to visit them and my aunt would tell my mother everything that was going on with everybody and, I don't know, that always made me feel uncomfortable, just the gossip –

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and, I don't know, maybe that gave me an appreciation for accuracy because I … just didn't feel comfortable with, you know, talking about what so and so did last Saturday night, third or fourth or fifth-hand.  
  
And, that was -- obviously the town with 1,000 people, or 10,000 people, wasn't quite as bad. It was a little bit more sophisticated, but we didn't have – we were not diversified, let's put it that way. I cannot remember seeing one –

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person – we had, because of the tomatoes again, every harvest, we would have some people come up from Mexico and it was the same people, it was the same families. And they would come up and they would harvest the tomatoes and then they would go back.  
  
They lived in horrible conditions, but yet I remember I worked at the grocery store in college, or in high school and college, and I remember really being glad to see these people every year when they would come back. We did not have one African-American in town until probably I was in college when the first black family moved to Bluffton.

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And, you know, it was just a very stereotypical, I guess, town of that era in Indiana.

*Genna Foster:* What was the media environment like in this place where you grew up?

*Linda Denning:* We had a newspaper, a daily newspaper, and the *Bluffton News Banner*, the publisher/owner, Roger Swain – he was friends with my dad, and I came to the age that I thought maybe it would be kind of fun to make some money on my own. And so I thought I could be a paper carrier, you know, that's something I could do. And it's not like our town was – I mean it was –

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it was pretty safe, we didn't have a lot of crime.  
  
And so I talked my dad into asking Mr. Swain if he would give me a job as a paper carrier. And my dad asked – I was with my dad when he asked him, and he said we don't have any girl paper carriers and he wouldn't give me the job. And I think that was my first clue that there wasn't a level playing field for both men and women.

*Genna Foster:* And that leads into my next question. So how would you describe the general expectations for men and for women in the place where you were growing up?

*Linda Denning:* Well, again, it was pretty, you know, women were teachers, women were nurses. I was thinking – I was looking over the –

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questions last night and I was trying to think of a woman I knew who was outside the norm. I mean was either in charge of a major business, who was a public official, who had some type of leadership role in the community and I could not think of any. And maybe, again, I'm not sure how much attention you pay to those things when you're growing up but, yeah, I could not think of a person. So obviously it was very much the men were in charge and –

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and the women stuck to pretty much what they did and –. Again, it was -- I grew up in the '60s, so that's pretty much the way it was.

*Genna Foster:* What were the biggest characteristics of your hometown that impacted you for the rest of your life?

*Linda Denning:* I think I had a friend one time who moved to western Kansas and … I hate to use these tags but just for a point of reference, he was a pretty liberal kinda guy and he moved to western Kansas and he told me one time, he said, you know, he said, it's the strangest thing –

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it's really hard to become part of the community in some ways, but if something happens to you, if you have a sick child, if your wife or husband falls ill, if your house burns down, the entire town is on your front step offering to help. And my hometown was kind of like that, too.  
  
There were very – I mean parts of town we lived – after we left the farm, we moved to Riverview in Bluffton, which was the high-end part of town. So, I was immediately accepted.

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I mean I – it was okay because – but I had a friend later on who lived in the west part of town and she fought that all of her life that, you know, she came from the west end and that was not a good thing. So, there were good things and bad things about growing up in a small town, as there are now.

*Genna Foster:* What was the –.

*Linda Denning:* And I think –.

*Genna Foster:* Oh, keep – nope, go ahead.

*Linda Denning:* No, I just – I think seeing that, because especially my friend from the west side of town, she is one of the most talented human beings I've ever known in my life and to limit her capacity and this goes, you know, male, female, whatever, –

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to limit someone's capacity just because of the street they're born on, I think that really made an impression and I think again it's something that I think has influenced me in my work later on because I thought it was so terribly unfair.

*Genna Foster:* What was the general media environment like in the U.S. when you were growing up?

*Linda Denning:* I have real trouble answering that. Obviously, newspapers were a lot more prominent than they are now. you know, Walter Cronkite and Huntley/Brinkley and –.

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I don't ever remember my dad saying, “Oh well, that's fake news, he got that all wrong.” You know, they really trusted these people. And I think the news seemed -- I am not sure how to express this. The news seemed further away.  
  
Our town was probably – it was like 18 miles from the Ohio border and about – I'm trying to remember how many miles we were south of Chicago. So we weren't close to Chicago, but we weren't that far away either. And in '68, during the Democratic Convention, –

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that was I think the first time that I really – I mean really, really news just really became part of my life.  
  
They had a lot of riots during the convention, and one of our editors from the local Bluffton newspaper was a delegate to the convention and he didn't write one word about the convention. I mean he was there, I mean, *[laughs]*, and he didn't write one word about the convention in his paper. And I remember telling – I remember asking my dad, why wouldn't he – why did they have somebody there and they're not covering it? And –

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and I didn't – I don't know if it's because that he just thought that was so far removed from our lives that people in Bluffton wouldn't be interested in what was going on in Chicago. I don't know. I just thought that was the weirdest thing ever.  
  
And so maybe we were a lot more parochial then, it was a lot more, you know, when we did get national or international news it was kind of like, well, yeah, that's interesting but that's so far away does that really have any impact on my life? Anyway, that's the way I remember it, and I'm still – I've always regretted not having the opportunity to ask that person, that editor, why he didn't write anything about the Democratic National Convention –

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when it was the biggest story of that period.

*Genna Foster:* Do you remember anything about the first ever televised debate, the Kennedy-Nixon debate?

*Linda Denning:* No, I'm kind of pleased to say that was a little bit before my time.

*Genna Foster:* What memories do you have of the Kennedy Assassination?

*Linda Denning:* Okay, that was -- I was a freshman in high school, and, I remember the look on my –.

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I was sitting in study hall and I remember looking out through the door and I saw the look on the face of my chemistry teacher [Floyd Soper]. My chemistry teacher was standing out in the hall talking to someone, and I saw the look on his face, and it was -- just I knew something was wrong. And then it came over – the principal [Fred Park] came over the intercom and said that President Kennedy had been shot …  
And actually, I know there's a question coming up –

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about other events, and I want to get this over with because I still – I think Bobby Kennedy's assassination had more of an impact. I was a huge, huge supporter of Bobby Kennedy. My freshman year at Ball State was '67, '68, and he came to Ball State and he talked to the students. And then he went back to – he had come into Indiana through Indianapolis. He had landed at the Indianapolis Airport. And they were taking them back – as the story goes later, they were taking him back to Indianapolis –

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and on the way back, they broke the news to him that Martin Luther King had been assassinated.  
  
And so when he got back to Indianapolis, he insisted on speaking to – at Indianapolis, and he was advised because a lot of towns -- a lot of the big cities were having terrible outbreaks of riots and people were so angry. And he said, no, I'm going to speak, and he did. And it was an incredible speech and it calmed Indianapolis. I mean Indianapolis was one of the few larger cities that did not have the unrest that a lot of them did.

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And, you know, given today's political climate, you gotta wonder what would have happened if Bobby Kennedy had not been assassinated. If he would have won, we wouldn't have had Richard Nixon. You don't know what would have happened for sure, but I think we just – we lost a really inspirational leader when he was assassinated.

*Genna Foster:* What memories do you have of the Vietnam War era?

*Linda Denning:* Oh, we –.

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Yeah. We were prime. My class, I graduated in '67 from high school. My class, the young men in my class, were right up at the front of the list to go to Vietnam. And when I was in high school, quite a few of my classmates ended up in Vietnam. There also was a thing – I don't know if this was true in the rest of the country, but it was true in Bluffton, Indiana, if you were a young man and you got into trouble you were given a choice –

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you could go to jail or you could enlist in the service. And, of course, if you enlisted in the service it was like an automatic trip to Vietnam.  
  
I had my friend from the west side of Bluffton, her eventual husband got into some issues. I don't know what he did – but anyway, he ended up in the service and in Vietnam and fortunately, he came home. Even the ones who came home, though, a couple of my classmates who served in Vietnam have committed suicide.  
  
And then in college, by the time I was in college, we had the [draft] lottery. So you had a number and –

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I think I remember this correctly. Like every Saturday night, they would draw numbers and if they drew your number you got to go to Vietnam and if they didn't draw your number you didn't have to go at least at that point.  
  
And I can remember we lived in a house with several other girls and probably about half the girls in that house had boyfriends who were eligible to go to Vietnam. My boyfriend had a punctured eardrum so he was – he got a medical pass because of that. But I can remember sitting around with my friends and, you know, the girls –

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just hoping that their boyfriends' numbers wouldn't get drawn. And I don't remember – actually I don't remember any of 'em going to Vietnam, any of their boyfriends going to Vietnam. But yeah, those were difficult times.  
  
And again, Indiana is a very conservative, a very conservative place. I go back, I still go back, I still have a lot of friends there, and I am amazed every time I go back because it seems like things have kind of become even more so than they were as I – when I was growing up. But, again –

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the protests, the Vietnam protest, those were so far removed from our lives. Ball State was – there was a day that -- I think there was like a national or some kind of take the day off from school. They wanted to – the organization was trying to get kids to stay home from classes that day to protest the war. And Ball State had better attendance that day than they had, you know, and it's like we were just so clueless, and again, I think –

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in a lot of ways we were sheltered from so much of what was going on in other places.

[**Post-production addition**: How much did the shooting at Kent State impact you?

Probably not as much as it should have. Those years in the late 1960s and early 1970s were crazy. As the product of a small, mostly conservative town and university, I really didn’t know what to think. But I suspect a lot of what I experienced then played a major role in my beliefs and politics later on.]

*Genna Foster:* Do you have any recollection of when Roe v. Wade was decided?

*Linda Denning:* Kind of in a vague sort of way but not – that was not a huge deal. I would have been in – it was in '73, wasn't it?

*Genna Foster:* Yes.

*Linda Denning:* Is that right?

*Genna Foster:* Yes.

*Linda Denning:* So, yeah, so I would have been working for the Journal then and the first actual –

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direct memory I have of that, I had moved to Kansas just in time to see Bob Dole elevate that to a major issue. Was it – when would it have been? He was running for the Senate against Dr. Bill Roy [in 1974] and like the weekend before the election or shortly before the election, Dole raised the – the Dole campaign raised the whole issue of abortion, and it just blew everything up. And that's when I remember –

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I don't remember so much when the Supreme Court decision came down, but I remember when it became a political issue. And it wasn't – it did not seem to me that it was a political issue immediately. It became one when politicians found out that they could use it as an issue against their opponents in many cases.

*Genna Foster:* What do you remember about Nixon resigning as president?

*Linda Denning:* You mean other than the fact, *[laughs]* it was a reason to really party?

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Again, I was at the Journal when that happened and I was – I had moved here from Indiana, I didn't know anybody. It was my first job out of college, and I think I was just trying to keep my head above water. Our publisher at the time was Whitley Austin, and Mr. Austin was something else. He had actually worked for William Allen White, and – he was a registered Republican, but he always said that the only reason he was a registered Republican was because he wanted to – that's the only way you could vote in a primary in Kansas. So you really weren't sure –

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you know, what side of the political fence he was on, but he really came to dislike Nixon  
  
And the biggest thing I remember was prior to his resignation, I remember Dole coming in the office because Dole would have been the -- was he the National Chairman at that time? [That ended in January 1973] He was very high in the Republican Party at that time, and he was still defending Nixon. And then the – I remember the Saturday Night Massacre because one of my best friends [Barbara Phillips] was actually on the city desk the night all that happened, and she was trying to get the Sunday paper out and it came across the wires that Nixon – or people had started firing and they wouldn't –

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[U.S. Deputy Attorney General William] Ruckelshaus [resigned] and all of that.  
  
And about, I don't know, maybe 15 minutes after it came over the wire, Mr. Austin came into the office, and he never came into the office on Saturdays, and he came into the office and he had obviously been at some kind of party because he was kind of a little bit tipsy. And then our editor also came in, and he had obviously been to some kind of social event, too. And mostly what I remember is my friend trying to deal with our publisher and our managing editor [Glenn Williams] and this major breaking news story and getting a paper out and I'm sure at some point –

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questioning whether there was another career she would be better suited for.  
  
And I remember Mr. Austin wrote a front-page editorial saying he [Nixon] needs to go, this is it, this is the final straw, he needs to resign. And, and he did – I mean not because Mr. Austin said he should resign but, you know, it wasn't too long after that that he did because a lot of people felt the same way. He had just really gone too far.

*Genna Foster:* What memories do you have of the Oklahoma City Bombing?

*Linda Denning:* I was actually at home that day. I had taken the day off, and I was actually at home, and one of my co-workers called me and – to tell me what was going on.

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And we did not send anybody to Oklahoma City. We did, however, send people to Herington and Junction City. And I actually went out to western Kansas because during the '80s I covered the American Ag Movement and a lot of the farmers who were active in the American Ag Movement went from the Ag Movement to like Posse Comitatus to – they really became, got into some pretty radical stuff.

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In fact, at one point, we were covering some – they were actually having military training sessions out in western Kansas, out in Wallace County. And my concern was, when I heard about all of this, was that somebody in western Kansas had been involved in it. And so I think, I suspect that, I could never prove it, I could never pin it down, but I suspect that Timothy McVeigh maybe had spent some overnights with some people in western Kansas who were sympathetic to his cause. I don't think they were sympathetic to him blowing up –

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the Federal Building, but I think they were sympathetic to some of his beliefs about government, those kinds of things.

*Genna Foster:* What do you remember about the 9/11 terrorist attacks?

*Linda Denning:* Not much. We were – that was press day, we’re a weekly in Ellsworth and that was press day, and we could not – we were using our computers to get out the paper and in the office we were in at that time it was really difficult to pick up any news. Radios didn't work. We couldn't turn on the radio –

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because we couldn't get the signal. So, we pretty much went through the day not knowing a lot.  
  
Obviously in the next week's paper, the whole paper was about –we had people from Ellsworth who were in Washington when everything happened. I don't think we had anybody in New York at the time. But we had stories about –. We had a Wilson girl [Nancy Malir] who is an attorney in Washington, and she was not too far from the Pentagon. We did kind of a point-by-point story on Senator Pat Roberts, what his day was like that day. And, –

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you know, talked to people in Ellsworth about their thoughts on it.  
  
But, yeah, the day that it happened we were – it was hard for us to get news just because we were in an old limestone building and we couldn't get any signals, any radio signals or anything to turn on a newscast.

*Genna Foster:* Were there any other events that were most important to you when you were growing up that we didn't already discuss?

*Linda Denning:* No, the Bobby Kennedy thing, that was, um – what's the song that -- has anybody here seen my old friend –

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Bobby? I still – if I'm driving and I hear that song, I still cry because, well, especially -- especially the last four years. But I just think of the lost potential that the country – In some ways, I think that was more of a turning point for the country than John Kennedy's assassination because -- I don't know about the war. I don't know how the war would have played out if Kennedy – John Kennedy had still been alive, but –

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[Lyndon] Johnson carried on a lot of the Civil Rights reforms and voting reforms that I think Kennedy probably would have supported. So from that aspect, I think things continued on as they would have under Kennedy.  
  
That certainly was not the case in '68 with Nixon. And you know, what's really frightening to me is Nixon doesn't look that bad now, given some of the things we've seen in the last four years. I think maybe even Nixon would be a little bit appalled at what's going on.

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*Genna Foster:* Are there any historically famous journalists you admire, and if so, why?

*Linda Denning:* I don't know if I can give you names. I always admired the women who were out there doing things – newspapers have never been, especially the newsroom, even –. I went to work for the Journal in '72 –

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and even then, that hasn't been that long ago and even then, women weren't totally accepted in the newsroom.  
  
I remember shortly after I went to work there, the League of Women Voters met in Salina, the state League, and so that was obviously a woman's story, so I got to cover that. And one of the things – they had called in experts across the state, the Use Value Amendment of farmland was going to be on the election ballot that year. And so – and it was, you know, it was a big topic.

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Well, when my managing editor found out that there was actually going to be news come out of this convention, he said, “I think maybe we'd better have one of the guys cover that.” And okay, first of all, I studied economics – I mean I studied journalism, but I really enjoyed economics and that was one of my major, major areas. And second of all, I had done a ton of reading on this constitutional amendment. So I was probably up to speed on it more than most of the guys in the office.  
  
And I ended up covering it, but you think about that attitude and then you go back –

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to women who in the -- much earlier, were foreign war correspondents and doing things that it was just amazing and you have to admire that. I mean you have to admire their talent and their determination and the fact that I'm sure just about everybody they knew was saying are you crazy, you can't do this, but they did. And I thought that was – I think again it's kind of another reason I was drawn to journalism because there were examples over the years of women who behaved outside of the norm and were very successful.

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*Genna Foster:* Okay. And then this is the final part of Part 1, so going back a little, just describing what your childhood was like and your aspirations of wanting to be a journalist. So, what was your childhood like?

*Linda Denning:* It was fine. *[laughs]*. I guess, I'm – in some ways I'm kind of a loner and that was probably because I grew up on a farm, and I would go for days without seeing anybody my own age. I tend to – a lot of my friends tend to be older. Again, I think that's because I grew up around older people.

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I didn't have, you know, I didn't have access to a lot of kids my own age until we moved to town, Bluffton.  
  
When we moved to Bluffton, it was awesome because I went from kind of being alone most of the time to – we had this great swimming pool in Bluffton, and I spent all of my days in the summertime at the swimming pool. I swam my way through my later childhood years and that was just -- that was perfect. Played baseball in the evenings and, –

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I sure can't complain about my childhood. It was a lot of fun.

*Genna Foster:* You note that your babysitter in third grade took you on a field trip to the *Journal Gazette* in Fort Wayne. Could you tell us more about her and the impact of that trip?

*Linda Denning:* Well, obviously, she pretty much set the course of my life, but her name is Charlotte [Sellers] and she lived about a half a mile from us out in the country, and she was older than I was. And I – she was somebody that I really looked up to. She was very outspoken, and I thought incredibly educated.

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She seemed to know a lot, well beyond her years – and I don't even remember her parents being on this trip, I just remember Charlotte. But went to – actually, it was I think they're called the Fort Wayne Newspapers. I'm not sure of the official name. But I saw those presses run, and I just thought that was the coolest thing I'd ever seen in my life.  
  
We moved shortly after that, and I never saw her again. I remember I had asked my dad about her, when I'd go home, and she worked for years on a paper in southern Indiana.

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She became a journalist and then she became a librarian. She's actually – she's still alive, she's a librarian, retired. But we're friends on Facebook. When I was KPA president, I thought, you know, I need to track her down and I did, and she was still working at the library. And I tracked her down through the Indiana Press Association and I called her one day, and she was just kinda like, you know, who is this? And I said, “I just wanted you to know the really – the impact you had on my life.”

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And, I said, “I really appreciate it. I mean I really – I just wanted to say thank you.” And, anyway, the next time I went to Indiana, which was probably maybe a year or two after that, we got together, and we talked for like – I think we spent the whole day together. We just sat in this restaurant, and we just talked and talked and talked.  
  
And I learned so much about her that I never knew. And then we still keep in touch. We're friends on Facebook, and we occasionally message back and forth. And she's still very outspoken. She goes to council meetings and commission meetings because sometimes she's not real happy with the coverage in the local paper so she provides her friends with her coverage of the meetings.

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And anyway, I'm so fortunate to have grown up near her that – like I said, she had a huge impact on my life.

*Genna Foster:* You note “that was the day I started writing and I never stopped.” What kind of writing did you do when you were young?

*Linda Denning:* I did fiction writing mostly … I remember I wrote a story for the school newspaper when I was in junior high school about being adopted from a fictional standpoint. I went through this period that –

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I loved – Jean Kerr was – I don't know if you know who she is. Her husband was like the drama critic for the *New York Times*, I think, for a long time. But she was the funniest writer I have ever read. She was just wonderful. She wrote about her children and she wrote about parties that they would go to. And they were involved in a lot of the New York openings and stuff. And she would write about what it was like to be the sometimes klutzy wife of a Broadway critic.  
  
  
And I just loved her stuff, so for a long while I tried to write like she did, and obviously I wasn't in New York and I wasn't married to a Broadway drama critic.

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I eventually moved on from that. But I just – I loved reading and trying to write something that maybe – I experimented using other people's style until I kinda came up with my own. I'm not sure how to put that, but it was just fun experimenting with different things. And I loved finding the right word and I drive my staff crazy because I'll go back and change something. I mean, every time I go back and read something, I find something I need to change.

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And unfortunately, that applies to their copy, too, so they wish I wouldn't but, you know, you can always make something better. It's – nothing is ever perfect.

*Genna Foster:* Before that field trip had you considered what else you wanted to be when you grew up?

*Linda Denning:* Oh, I was gonna be a teacher, yeah, and that was about as far as I had gotten.

*Genna Foster:* Did you have a role model when you were growing up?

*Linda Denning:* I thought about that. I was really close to my grandmother [Lesta Mahaffey]. And – I just thought she was everything. When I was in grade school, we would always have someone – every year, each student would –

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get to have their parents come and visit them and spend the day with them at school. My parents were really busy. I mean they really worked hard. A dairy is not – a dairy is kinda like a restaurant. I mean you – it's 24/7. And so my grandmother would come and every kid in my class literally looked forward to the day that my grandmother came because she was a phenomenal cook and she would bring all of – she'd bring cake and fried chicken and anything else she could think of.  
  
And the kids just – and they loved talking to her. She'd sit down and she'd talk with them and be so interested in what they were doing.

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And she used to have – I'd have slumber parties out at her house. She lived in the country, and she let us – when I got old enough to drive, she let me drive before my dad did. In fact, if my dad had ever found out half the stuff that she let me do, he'd probably not have been happy. But she – yeah – she was just the greatest grandmother ever.

*Genna Foster:* This is the end of Part 1.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Kody Ross:* This is Kody Ross. Today is October 1, 2020. I’m interviewing Linda Denning of the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists Project. This is part two. 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.

Ok, Linda. How much formal education did you have before beginning your journalism career?

*Linda Denning:* A bachelor’s from Ball State University.

*Kody Ross:* What was your major?

*Linda Denning:* My major was economics and -- with a minor in journalism.

*Kody Ross:* And why did you choose that major?

*Linda Denning:* I was really – I mean, I found economics really interesting and, and I took a lot of history classes, too.

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And I had a lot of interest and I thought that just majoring in journalism -- that was more of a “you learn by doing” kind of thing than it was a studying kind of thing. So that’s why I chose not to major in journalism.

*Kody Ross:* Your first job was at the student newspaper at Ball State University. What are your favorite memories of working for the paper?

*Linda Denning:* Just the year that I started at Ball State was the first year that the university offered a major in journalism.

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And I’m not sure how prepared they were. Our journalism classes were conducted -- and I had no sense when it comes to directions. So, one side of the campus was -- the student union was the last building on that side of campus. We were behind the student union. They had actually bought two private homes. And the newspaper was in one of the homes and the yearbook was in the other home. And that’s where we had our classes. And it was like kind of being in your own world. I mean you were part of the campus yet you kind of sort of weren’t.

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And I think there’s maybe always a special comradery between journalism students, but I certainly felt that when I was at Ball State that, you know, we belonged to our own little special, group. I love writing on deadline, which I’m not sure if that’s even healthy. But I discovered that working for the paper -- it was just a cool, cool thing to do. I totally enjoyed every -- all of my experiences and the people I met and decided that I had made a pretty good decision on a career choice.

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*Kody Ross:* What else were you involved in, with in school?

*Linda Denning:* Actually, not a lot. My dad was really a wonderful role model and a great guy, but he almost had a heart attack when he found out that I wanted to go into journalism. I talked about this a little bit with the Hall of Fame thing. He really had this viewpoint that, you know, newsrooms were kind of like the old Front Page movie days.

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And he just couldn’t see that this would be a place that his daughter should be. But he finally did come around. However, in the meantime, he said, “If you’re going to major in journalism, afraid you’re going to have to do it on your own.” And so I did. So about every weekend, I left school and went home and worked for the Kroger company, which kind of interesting side note, when I quit Kroger, when I got out of school and went to work for the Journal -- I can’t remember. It took me like five years to build up to what I was making at Kroger as a school student --

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it took me that long to equal my salary at the Journal. So anyway that’s –

*Kody Ross:* Oh go ahead.

*Linda Denning:* Well, no. I just, you know, I took an extra load at school. So, between classes and working for the paper and going home and working on weekends that was, that was about it.

*Kody Ross:* So other than your dad, did you have any other doubts or concerns about pursuing journalism?

*Linda Denning:* I really didn’t. I just knew that’s what I wanted to do, and mostly it was the writing. I wanted to do something that would involve writing.

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But – and I wanted something that was a little bit out of the ordinary. I wanted something that was not necessarily a 9 to 5 job. And boy, boy did I get that right … I guess journalism just fit all of my criteria for what I wanted in a career.

*Kody Ross:* So I know you’ve said that your dad had his initial doubts. What did your other family and friends – how did they react to your decision to become a journalist?

*Linda Denning:* I don’t remember anybody really reacting much one way or the other. My grandfather [Charles Mowery] who – oh long story.

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My grandfather, who I was not that close to and did not know that well because he and my grandmother had actually been divorced, and I was very close to my grandmother. Not so much him. I remember he brought me a typewriter, a little kids’ typewriter and that was – I still am amazed at that because, you know, we hardly ever saw each other over the years because we were – like I said, there’d been a divorce in the family plus he lived in another town. And I think that’s the only time that he ever – that’s the only gift he ever gave me. And I just thought that was totally strange.

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To this day, I don’t know what prompted him to do that, but it’s certainly something I remember. And I said I didn’t get a lot of reaction from anybody else. But my dad always thought teaching would be a good, good career choice.

*Kody Ross:* Ok. Well, this is the end of part two.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Mayra Torres:* This is Mayra. Today is Oct. 8, 2020. I am interviewing Linda Denning of the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists Project. This is part three. This interview is taking place remotely due to COVID pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association. Linda, what was your first job out of college at the Salina Journal?

*Linda Denning:* Actually, I was hired to work on the -- in those days we called it the society desk, and we did the weddings, the engagements, the birth announcements. The highlight of the year was the hospital auxiliary had a style show at the country club. And we all fought to cover that ‘cause the food was great, and it was just a fun event to cover.

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So, wasn’t a lot of hard news involved. I tried to segue over into bringing some hard news onto the society page. And just because that was a more interesting way to spend the day than writing engagements, weddings, etc., as important as they were. There was more to life than, you know, weddings, engagements, etc.

*Mayra Torres:* Yeah. What year was that?

*Linda Denning:* I started in ’72, in August of ’72.

*Mayra Torres:* Why did you decide to move to Kansas?

*Linda Denning:* When I got out of college, we were kind of – jobs were not easy to find.

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And I was originally from Indiana, so I was looking for a job in Indiana and -- I worked for an employment agency for a while and just did some odd jobs just to kind of keep my bank account still alive until I could find a job in journalism.

[**Post-production addition:** In college and after, I did the books for a grocery store and cash register, worked one night in a pretzel factory (it was awful), worked in a bar and upscale department store.]

And, and I was – I could have taught, too. I had that option. And that was really a kind of an interesting time just in education. We just, you know, between 1968 and the early ‘70s, everything just kind of news-wise just kind of exploded.

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But, anyway, I had a friend who lived in Topeka and -- a high school friend -- and came out just to visit to get away from Indiana for a while. And while I was out here, I started applying for jobs. And *The Journal* had an opening, and they ended up hiring me. And that’s how I ended up in Kansas. It was just kind of a series of coincidences.

*Mayra Torres:* Ok. So you would say that *The Journal* was your first journalism job?

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. First professional, yes.

*Mayra Torres:* How long did you stay at this job?

*Linda Denning:* I was there, if I had been there a few more months, it would have been 27 years.

*Mayra Torres:* Wow. What was the media environment like at that time?

*Linda Denning:* When I started?

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm.

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*Linda Denning:* Oh, I think, you know, I think people were a lot more impressed with journalists than maybe they are today. I always kind of felt special because people were glad to see you when you showed up for an event … now I mean, people are happy you’re there, but you also get a lot of, “Who told you about this? How did you know about this event?”

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I just think there was a lot more goodwill maybe towards journalists then than there is now … I think we were still seeing, remnants from the days that -- I keep harping on this, but it is true. I think we were still seeing remnants from the days that women were not particularly welcome in newsrooms. We had a gentleman, a senior reporter at *The Journal* [John Schmeidler], who actually turned out to be one of my most valuable friends, eventually, but he made it really rough on women in the newsroom. And I think he – it was his way of testing people. He made it rough – to his credit he made it rough on the male journalists, too. I guess from that sense he didn’t discriminate.

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But he probably sent a lot of people to other professions. He expected a lot and if you didn’t deliver, you paid the consequences, which was pretty much public humiliation. And, yeah. It was just –the unions were big. Our back shop, our press rooms were unionized. And I remember when the union contract would come due and everybody just like oh my gosh, the union contract is due. I mean even people who were not directly involved. That was a huge deal,

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and even our publisher [Whitley Austin] who wasn’t really afraid of much of anything, was a little bit nervous during union negotiation time. Yeah. It was a lot different. It was -- I think certainly the union members had a lot of clout at that time. That’s again something that’s not the case anymore.

*Mayra Torres:* How many women were in your newsroom?

*Linda Denning:* Uh, when I started there, let’s see. There were – let’s see. There were two actual women reporters. And, I’m trying to think. Let’s see.

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One, two, say out of a 10-person reporting staff like two of the reporters were women. We had a woman on the copy desk. We had the society editor, and then her assistant and that was – and a woman photographer. We had a woman photographer at that time. [Barbara Phillips and Karen Black.]

*Mayra Torres:* What was it like being a woman journalist at this time?

*Linda Denning:* It was, you know, when you’re young – I was like – I celebrated my 24th birthday shortly after I started at *The Journal*. And I guess I was too young and dumb to know that there were supposed to be limits on what I could do.

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I remember – I tell this story ‘cause I think it’s pretty typical of some of the attitudes of that period. You still had your more traditional editors running the newsroom. And when I started, there was a constitutional amendment that year on ag land, how ag land was going to be valued for taxation purposes. And, you know, it was a big deal especially in the agricultural community. The League of Women Voters decided they were going to have their state convention in Salina.

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So the first reaction from our assignments editor was oh, one of those women organizations are going to be meeting in Salina. So I got assigned to the story. I was supposed to cover the convention. Well, I had a program, so I pretty much knew what they were going to talk about. And one of the things they were going to talk about was use value of farmland. And I didn’t know anything about that. I was from Indiana, knew nothing. But I did a lot of research because I knew it was going to be a big deal because they had Barry [Flinchbaugh], who was the economist at Kansas State, was going to be there. And he was like the go-to guy on information on the constitutional amendment. The Farm Bureau was going to have somebody there. So it was going to be a big deal.

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And I spent my nights reading up on farmland and agriculture and trying to get as much background as I could. Plus, I had one of the -- my course of study was economics so, you know, I figured by the time I went in I was pretty well prepared. Maybe a day or two before the meeting, the assignments editor came up to me. He had seen a copy of the agenda and when he saw that that was on the agenda, he came up to me and these were his exact words. I’m not making this up. I will remember these words forever. He said, “I think maybe we should have one of the guys cover this.” And I won’t tell you exactly what I said, but I ended up covering the meeting.

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And, but that was – that was kind of the attitude. It was like oh well, ok, ok. Turns out this is important after all so, you know, let’s give this to – let’s give this to one of the guys. And it wasn’t always like that. I don’t – I don’t want it to sound like it was always like that, but there was certainly some of that when I started out in the newsroom.

*Mayra Torres:* What kind of like technology did you use? Did you use computers when you first started or –

*Linda Denning:* Oh well, that wasn’t. That was just kind of Freudian. We were actually typewriters. I can’t believe this. I go so far back that I used typewriters, yeah. Typewriters, we had the old clacky, you know, AP machine that probably damaged all of our hearing, and well, even I mean digital cameras have been a fairly recent development.

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I think about our photographers and how many chemicals they inhaled over the years just trying to develop photos. And we shortly after – well, actually shortly before I started at *The Journal*, *The Journal* was one of the – it’s my understanding that *The Journal* was one of the first newspapers in the state to do color and they had gone offset. In college, we had gone offset in college. Our college paper was printed with that technology. And *The Journal* had made that transition. Then again it wasn’t too long --

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I hadn’t been there very long until our publisher [Whitley Austin] at the time, who was close to retirement, decided that before he retired he wanted to computerize the newsroom or computerize the place. So, we ended up doing that. We went from typewriters to computers and that was – it was difficult for everyone I think, but it was especially difficult for the older people in the newsroom. The gentleman I was talking about that made all of our lives difficult if we didn’t get the story to his satisfaction -- it was horrible for him. I can still remember him and yeah, just it -- it was really difficult.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm.

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*Linda Denning:* Yeah … he always came in early in the morning and you would walk in and he would be standing there like looking at his computer like, you know, and the next minute he was going to pick it up and throw it through a window or something … I don’t think he ever achieved a comfort level with it.

*Mayra Torres:* So, sorry. I have a quote from you. One of the best times in my life was spent at Salina. Is that where you met your husband?

*Linda Denning:* It is. It is. Pete was good friends -- his best friend [Pat Gaston] was -- worked in the newsroom. And so Pete was in there a lot. And, then of course, he became friends with other people in the newsroom.

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And newsroom people if you don’t know it yet, you’ll probably learn it at some point. Newsroom people were just kind of weird. *[Laughs]* I mean, I think they’re a little bit more maybe mainstream now than they were back, back then. But I had this, I had this dinner one Sunday night for people. I’d invited several couples in the newsroom. And for some reason everybody had a fight that night. I mean nobody was talking to anybody.

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And anyway, my future husband ended up being the only one who was halfway in a good mood that night. That was a horrible night. *[Laughs]* It was just, I mean weird stuff like that just always was happening in the newsroom. But he and I start dating. And he had actually in addition to his best friend working in the newsroom, he had grown up across the street from *The Journal*. And one of his stories was when he was in grade school or junior high school *The Journal* building was built on the -- it’s on the river, it’s on the Smoky Hill River. And when you go out on the patio, you can see the river. I mean it’s right there.

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And when my husband was growing up on Fourth Street, the river was at its full strength. It was prior to the ’51 flood so they had not diverted the river. And you could go boating on the river. There was – they rented boats and it was just really a cool thing. And Salina is trying to bring that back I think, but it’s been a while since there was that kind of activity on the river. But anyway, my husband wrote a letter to the editor because he was very concerned because it was his understanding at the time that *The Journal* was kind of using the river for some of its waste, to dispose of some of its waste, which at that time would have included hot lead probably. And so he wrote, as an environmentalist, a little kid concerned about the environment and this river, one of my favorite places.

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And he said they never ran his letter. So I don’t know. That was his story. Did not have firsthand knowledge of that. But he had a lot of memories of *The Journal* growing up. And as did most people in Salina. It was an incredibly important part of the community.

*Mayra Torres:* For clarification what was your husband’s full name and the job he held, job title?

*Linda Denning:* Peter Denning. And he was -- he worked for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

*Mayra Torres:* Perfect. Thank you. What other memories do you have from Salina?

*Linda Denning:* Oh, a lot.

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I mean, I think one of the great things about this job is we get to experience things that other people don’t in the normal course of their lives. And, you know, I don’t even know where to begin. I loved covering politics ... we covered Dole when he ran for president. Just so many experiences that I wouldn’t have had otherwise if I had been in a different field.

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*Mayra Torres:* How did your first journalism job affect your understanding ofthe journalism work?

*Linda Denning:* I think you have to work on a newspaper to understand. A lot of people don’t understand the deadline aspect of the job. I know there would be days that I would – I’d call my husband and I’d say hey, I’m going to be home late tonight, something happened this afternoon and I have to get this. I have to get this story in.

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And he would say, “Well, can’t you just do it tomorrow?” And I mean for a non-journalist, Pete was probably closer to that whole system than most people. And even he didn’t quite get the full significance of no, we need that story today for tomorrow’s paper. And, and I see that here, too. When I hire somebody, I, you know, that’s one of the things that I really try to explain to them and tell them that that’s something they’re going to have to deal with. And some of them never get it. I mean just never understand that accuracy and timeliness are two of the biggest things you can shoot for.

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And, and then John, who I keep going back to as kind of the person in the newsroom that -- John was, “You get the story and, you know, you get it ethically, you get it honestly, but you get the story. You don’t come back to the newsroom emptyhanded.” And, and he also really put a high value on writing. He was a beautiful writer. In fact, he had had job offers from national publications. He actually in a lot of ways brought poetry to the pages of the *Salina Journal.*

[**Post-production addition:** John Schmeidler. John was a huge influence and my son, Matthew’s, godfather.]

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So writing is really important to me. I mean the quality of writing and I look at papers today and there are a lot of good writers. There are a lot of wonderful writers working for papers. But they’re also, you know, back when I started -- and I did not make this observation. This was actually made by an ad person, who told me that he could pick up the paper and if there were not any bylines on any of the stories he could still tell you who wrote them because every reporter had their own style, their own way of approaching stories and that didn’t make anybody right or anybody wrong.

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It just -- it’s just that they had an individual way of writing. And I’m not sure we still have that. I’m not sure that that is still the case. But that’s the way it was back then. You know, back in the good old days.

*Mayra Torres:* Why did you decide to leave the Salina paper?

*Linda Denning:* Well, you probably – do you know who Bill Brown is? Bill Brown was editor of the – publisher/editor of *The Garden City Telegram* during the Clutter murders and so he was kind of a big deal in Kansas journalism.

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He ended up at K-State as the – I believe he was the publications adviser, but anyway, Bill – I met Bill because he did some consulting work for the Harris chain, which owned *The Salina Journal.* And he would come and spend, oh I don’t know, a couple weeks with us. And he would critique our writing and just kind of do things to make the paper better. And, anyway, *The Journal* wrote a story, a Sunday edition story, that Sharon Montague and I -- who was another reporter at *The Journal* -- were leaving *The Journal* to start a newspaper in Ellsworth. And Bill’s reaction was -- Monday morning as I walked in the office my phone was ringing and it was Bill.

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And he said – he didn’t say, “Hi. This is Bill Brown.” He didn’t say – he just – when I answered the phone he said, “Are you out of your freaking mind?” ‘Cause he had read the story that we were leaving our jobs to start a newspaper in Ellsworth, which already had a newspaper. I don’t know. I think maybe we were both just kind of -- I don’t even know how to put it. I’m not sure why we did that, but it seemed to make sense at the time. We had tried to buy – Sharon and I -- Sharon lived in Ellsworth, and we had tried to buy the *Reporter,* which was for sale. And we had been outbid by a chain [Morris Multimedia] out of Savannah, Georgia.

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And so some people came to us, including the local banker, and said, “We’re really concerned about our newspaper going to out-of-state ownership. Would you guys consider going ahead and starting a paper?” And so Sharon and I talked about it and said, “Sure. Why not?” And it was really traumatic because both of us really loved *The Journal* and, uh – but at that time, my job was changing. *The Journal* was pulling back on its coverage area. We covered all of northwest and north central Kansas. And I loved that. I mean I just – and they had enough confidence in me to let me pick my own stories and, you know, pretty much do what I wanted to do.

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And then toward the end of my time there, it was -- they kept cutting back on area coverage. I was being assigned more stories. And I just didn’t – it wasn’t the same job. So I guess I was open to a different, a different situation. And when Ellsworth presented itself jumped at the chance to try something different.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. When was that? When did they come forward and approached you?

*Linda Denning:*: Our first edition was in the spring of 1999.

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So, the people who owned *The Reporter* were Karl and Dorothy Gaston [See Appendix] and they had been killed in a tragic car accident back East. They were visiting, had three sons, and they were visiting their youngest son when, when they had the accident. And so that was -- that was difficult for the community, too. And, it was just – it was just a tragic situation. But the boys did put the newspaper up for sale after the funeral. And said -- actually Sharon and I were bidding on it separately.

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And then, once we realized that we were doing that, we kind of pooled our resources and then we were up against Morris Multimedia. And obviously they had a lot more resources than we did. So it turned out well because we avoided a lot of debt because it was actually cheaper to start a new paper than it was to buy the existing publication.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. What were your biggest goals and dreams about founding the paper?

*Linda Denning:* Just trying to survive. And again, I look back then, and I think I really must have been crazy. I mean Bill Brown was right.

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My husband had passed away. Let’s see, that would have – three years earlier -- my husband had passed away three years earlier. And we had two children. My son, when we ended up moving to Ellsworth, my son [Matthew] was a senior in high school. So he had gone his entire school career to Salina and then his senior year he got to go to Ellsworth, which he did fine and everybody was really great and accepting. But it was still – that’s hard moving, moving your senior year. And my daughter [Allyn] was two years younger.

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And the good thing is, they still after all this time, some of their best friends are from Ellsworth. I mean in the short time that they went to school here, they made some lasting friends. But, yeah. I just -- mostly I was just -- let’s get this newspaper in a good financial situation so I don’t stay awake at nights worrying about whether I’m going to make the mortgage payment next month.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. How many staff members did you have?

*Linda Denning:* Let’s see, two, four, five. There were about six of us altogether.

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We had -- we had some great talent. Barb [Holm] who now works at the hospital. Barb was -- she could do anything. She was our graphic designer. She could do anything, including cartoons. She did an original cartoon for us every week. And we had no intention of hiring Barb -- she wasn’t even on our radar. And she just like stumbled in, shortly before we put out our first edition and said, “You know, I’m looking for a job. Thought you might have something for me.” And we ended up hiring her. Our advertising director Garnell [Hanson] worked for the competing newspaper, had for many years.

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And Sharon and I needed an advertising director ‘cause we didn’t think that we could sell ads. And so we had – Sharon and I had talked. And a couple -- we had a couple people in mind, but they fell through. So here we are about ready to start the paper and we have no ad director. And so we decided we were going to call Garnell and see if she would come to work for us, if we could lure her away from *The Reporter.* And before we called her, said we both decided that if she turned us down, we would not start the paper, that we needed an advertising person. And, anyway, it was on a Sunday. I called Garnell.

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Never. She had no idea who I was, never talked to her before and introduced myself and I said, “We’d like to talk to you about a job. Would you be interested in meeting with us?” I just waited for her to say, “No. I’m not going to meet with you.” Anyway, she said yes. And she told us later that she was ready to say no and her husband said, “Well, talk to them. It won’t hurt to talk to them.” And I think when she talked to us, she was so appalled by how much we didn’t know that she thought somebody needs to watch over these girls to make sure they don’t really get in trouble. And, anyway, she went to work for us. We got the sports editor, who was also just a great column writer. Who else?

*[0:38:00]*

Well, Sharon and I obviously. I mean we were like two people, but we were doing the work of four people. And it was just – it was a great, great staff. And you know, we’re still really close. I mean it’s kind of like going through a really bonding experience. We’re all very close to this day.

*Mayra Torres:* What were some of the biggest stories you covered during this time?

*Linda Denning:* Well, let’s see. The [ACME] brick plant blew up. That was kind of a biggie and then -- no one was hurt. Fortunately, no one was hurt. But it did put quite a dent in the economy of Kanopolis.

*[0:39:00]*

Brick plant. Since I have been here, in 20 years, we’ve had one murder. And that was a young man who just happened to be driving through the county. He was from McPherson. As far as really breaking news stories, those are probably the two biggest. We also have two wind farms. That was very controversial. In fact, I suspect it still is. You know, things that come and go. Every so often somebody suggests we have county zoning and, and that always brings everybody out pro and con.

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Obviously COVID right now. Ellsworth County is up to 74 cases, which I need to look and see. I’m not sure that’s -- I’m not sure how that compared to other counties. I haven’t had an opportunity to really look into that. But it sounds high but maybe not. I don’t know.

*Mayra Torres:* What was it like to compete against another paper in the same town?

*Linda Denning:* It was – *[Laughs]* I don’t even know what to say. One of our great supporters was Tom Eblen [See Appendix].

*[0:41:00]*

And that name should be familiar to some of you at K-State. Or I’m sorry, forgive me, KU. My husband was a big K-State fan so that’s why I – my daughter went to KU. So anyway, Tom asked me that question one time. And I said I didn’t pay any attention to them. I said I didn’t read *The Reporter*. I said I didn’t want to see *The Reporter*. I said I was not really -- I mean I knew what they were doing out in the community, but it wasn’t something that I really kept close watch over because I have a tendency to be a perfectionist sometimes.

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Thank you, my dad. I got that from my dad. And I knew that if I looked in *The Reporter* and I saw a story that they had and we didn’t, it would totally – I’d be thinking about it for, you know, days. And so it took less of my time and energy not to – I was just better off not looking. And besides everybody on my staff, they would look at *The Reporter* and they would know. I mean there was -- it wasn’t as if nobody was saying, “Oh, maybe we should do a story on this or maybe we should do a story on that.”

*[0:43:00]*

I just didn’t want to – it was just something I didn’t want to be part of my business plan.

*Mayra Torres:* In 2001 you agreed to a partnership with Morris with the now merger newspaper and the *Ellsworth County Independent Reporter.* Why did you decide to do the merger?

*Linda Denning:* We were kind of at a break-even point. The paper was at a break- even point. So they had called -- their chief operating officer had called and actually Sharon and I had met with them. And then I met with him again and I said no.

*[0:44:00]*

I don’t want to do this. And I remember one Tuesday morning we were trying to get the newspaper out, and he called and he said, “You know, I know you said no, but I don’t think you really meant that.” He said, “Can we meet one more time?” And at that time, I would have said anything to get him off the phone ‘cause I needed to get a paper out. And, I said yeah, sure. Just when, where. So anyway, we met again and the night before we met, I wrote out on just like a reporter’s notebook sheet of paper I wrote out what it would take to get me to merge. And I didn’t hold back.

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I mean, I thought what I was asking for was pretty outlandish. So I figured, OK, this will end this once and for all. So, we met in Great Bend because they owned the Great Bend paper. And he said OK, what would it take to get you to merge? And I handed him this sheet of paper. And he looked at it for about two minutes and he said, “OK.” Like what? Are you serious? And, yeah and we merged. And they have been great. I mean they are absolutely, even their chief financial officer [Jeff Samuels],

*[0:46:00]*

I mean, he understands newspapers. They try to help us, support us in any way they can. It has been -- it has really been a good, good thing. Because not too long after that, not too long after we merged, we kind of hit an advertising slump. Not just *The Reporter* or *The Independent,* but most newspapers kind of went into an advertising, a bad advertising period. And I look back on that and I think man, if we hadn’t merged, I don’t know if we would have survived that. Because that was the one thing that we did not have.

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I thought we’d beat them in every category there was except we did not have deep pockets. Our financial situation was not nearly as long term as theirs. And that’s where they had us. They could always outwait us. But fortunately, they didn’t. As I said, it was, you know, they are majority owners. But all decisions are made here. Everything is done here. *The Independent Reporter* is a local newspaper, and Morris Multimedia has been a huge part of making sure that it remains a local newspaper. So I can’t say enough good things about them.

[**Post-production addition:** The founder of Morris Multimedia, Charles Morris, sets the tone for the chain and deserves recognition for the support we have received over the years.]

*[0:48:00]*

*Mayra Torres:* So in 2001 a fire destroyed the newspaper office. Can you tell us what you remember about that day?

*Linda Denning:* It was 2011. Did you say –

*Mayra Torres:* Oh 2011, yes. I did not see the one.

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. Oh, my business manager [Juanita Kepka] called me. It was a Sunday. It was Father’s Day in fact. My business manager called me, and she said, “So have you heard anything about the fire downtown?” And I said no. And said, I said, “Where is it?” She said it’s at First and -- where were we? Was it – no Second, Second and Douglas. I’m going, “Second and Douglas, Second and Douglas. Oh crap.” And anyway, so I jump in my car and come downtown, and I get downtown and there are firefighters everywhere.

*[0:49:00]*

I mean all I had to do was step outside my house and you could see the smoke. And the thing I remember -- you know how in some things, you know, these little snapshots just remain in your mind forever. When I got downtown, the first thing I saw was the attorney whose office was in the next block south of us, and we were actually at the north end of the block. So there would have been like the better part of a block between us, between us and his office. And he was carrying out his papers, the papers that he wanted to save in case the fire went down that far.

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And that’s when I realized that, ok, this could take this whole side of downtown. And fortunately, we have a great fire department and they called in – they have a mutual aid agreement with other fire departments. Russell came in, many other fire departments came in and they fought the fire. They pumped water in from the top. They had one of those overhead things that – and they pump water in from the top and that really confined it. The back of our building, it started in the back of our building. And that, it destroyed the back of the building. We were in the front. Between the water damage and the smoke damage and we lost -- we pretty much lost everything.

*[0:51:00]*

We got the old morgue books out. One of the people [Dorothy Grothusen], who actually worked for years for the Reporter and then when we started she wrote a historical column for us, she and her husband lived out in the country and she took all those books and put them in their corn bin. And, every day, she would go out and turn pages to dry them out and, and save those -- save all that history … That was quite a Sunday.

*[0:52:00]*

And I remember calling our chief financial officer [Jeff Samuels] and telling him that their property in Ellsworth was on fire. And calling our staff and telling them to get to Ellsworth, that we had a major story to cover. One of our reporters actually lives in Russell, which is about 30 miles west of here and he said he saw the smoke from the fire about the time he hit the Ellsworth County line, which would have been maybe 20 miles to the west of us. So yeah. It was a pretty, pretty impressive fire.

*Mayra Torres:* Was it determined how the fire started?

*Linda Denning:* No. I don’t think our – we actually rented that building, and our landlord [Mark Roehrman] was a contractor and he had his workshop in the back of that building.

*[0:53:00]*

And they think, he speculated -- He and his wife lived in the basement, and fortunately they got out. That was the big deal. I mean they very well could have been trapped in that building and – but fortunately they weren’t. But Mark, the owner, thought that perhaps he had plugged in, I don’t know, sander or something. Some piece of equipment to recharge the batteries. And he thought maybe there was some -- that it had sparked or something had happened that it had started the fire. But we never, the fire marshal never really came up with a reason. No one was really sure.

*[0:54:00]*

They know exactly where it started but not why it started.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. You and your team still managed to get a newspaper out that week. Talk about why that was important to you.

*Linda Denning:* Well, it’s really important that -- that was a major blow to the community. I mean, that building had a long history with the community. And other businesses were damaged. We had a chiropractor on one side of us. H&R Block was on the other side of us. Both of those buildings, well, and the hardware store had a lot of damage.

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And it was just such an event. Number one, I couldn’t stand the thought of everybody – ‘cause all the television stations and, you know, everybody like ran to Ellsworth when they heard the paper was on fire to do a story. And I couldn’t stand the thought of everybody having the story except us because we couldn’t print. So, that was one of the reasons. Another reason was I think especially in a time of kind of disaster or tragedy -- I don’t know exactly what you would call that. I don’t want to be overly dramatic. But I think it’s really important for the newspaper to show people that, you know, life goes on, that these may not be normal times, but we’re going to make them as normal as we can.

*[0:56:00]*

Because … I remember years ago, a fellow publisher [Ann Charles] had a – there was a tornado in southeast Kansas, and they really went the extra mile to get their paper out that week. And Ben Marshall at Sterling had had a fire in his building, a number of years ago. And in both of those cases, they put out papers that week. And I remembered them talking about how important it was to the community and, anyway I think that was just part of our job. I mean, I just think that’s something that we needed to do.

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And there was never ever any consideration that we would not put out a paper that week. In fact, we also have Marquette, which is a really tiny weekly newspaper. And we actually put Marquette out twice that week because we had the pages ready to go when the fire took out our computers and everything. So we had to redo Marquette so we actually *[Laughs]*… we actually ended up doing like three papers that week instead of two.

*Mayra Torres:* What was it like working out of the high school? How long were you there?

*Linda Denning:* We were just there for that edition, that first edition. And the night of the fire, I had received a phone call from a couple of friends who had been in Wichita and they were driving back to Ellsworth and they heard it on the news.

*[0:58:00]*

And she [Tina Davis] immediately called me and said, “Do you want to use our building?” They had a building the next block down. And I said, “Yes, yes we need a building.” And so we had a building, and you know, I really want to talk about this. I mean people were incredible. The firefighters. And it was a hot -- that wasn’t an easy fire to fight ‘cause it was so hot that night and, and then with the fire and everything it was -- it was miserable to fight it I’m sure. But in addition to that, somebody called -- Tina Davis, who has a restaurant [Ellsworth Steak House] here called and offered their building.

[**Post-production addition:** She and her husband, Rick, own the building we remodeled after the fire and still occupy. We never went back to our old office. It is now a dress shop and apartment.]

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We didn’t have any notebooks. We didn’t have any pens. We didn’t have anything. The gift shop people [Ken and Alice Robson of Robson Card & Gift Shop] opened up their store to us at night and we went through and, and got enough supplies to get us through that week. And then when we tried to pay for them, they refused to take payment. We got the paper out that next day, but, you know, I had people showing up at the high school, people that I hadn’t seen. You know, photographers that I’d worked with, they’d heard about it and they came to help us**.**

*[1:00:00]*

Mary Hoisington and Dale Hogg from *The Great Bend Tribune* showed up to help us put out the paper. Doug Anstaett from the Kansas Press Association, and just well, and when we came back – after we got the paper out and I came back our new office, our new building, the, *Salina Journal* had sent their IT guy [Bob Kelly] and with computers. And he literally set up a network for us. I mean everybody was just incredible.

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And the community, you know, the community really -- our Dairy Queen guy sent over – my daughter was working in Wichita at the time and, when she heard, she headed back. And when she showed up, she had a box of dilly bars. And that’s like the only thing we had to eat I think in three days. We didn’t sleep. We, you know, lived on dilly bars and, but like I said, everybody was just – we couldn’t have asked for more support than what we received.

*Mayra Torres:* I’m going to deviate a little bit. You recently received a grant designed to create a model for really small newspapers especially weeklies with extremely limited staff to add revenue through digital offerings.

*[1:02:00]*

Will you talk a little bit about this project?

*Linda Denning:* You know, in reading through the questions, that was the one question I’m not sure I can tell you anything more than when I applied for the grant. We, first of all, we got sidetracked a little bit because of COVID. For some reason, this year has just been – I don’t even know how to explain it. Maybe somebody else can do a better job than I can. Because it’s just been -- everything has been so much harder. I mean it’s taken so much more time because, you know, well, just a lot of things. The technology, you’d think, oh well, yeah. OK. Well, let’s do a Zoom meeting.

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That will be really easy. And then you find out that half the people that want to tune into your meeting don’t have the technology to do it. And so you’ve got to figure that out and then – it’s just or somebody Zoom bombs you or, you know, it’s just – anyway, my facetious answer to that would be going back to the typewriters, which weren’t nearly as big of headache as technology is. But that’s probably not going to be too viable. So years ago I had -- during an interview with the congressman [Sen. Pat Roberts], he said it was his first term. He had just been elected.

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And he said … there’s a lot of things, you know, I hope I could do. But I think it’s also as important to come up with – to stop bad bills as it is to support good ones, have your name on good ones. And I kind of – I thought of that as I was thinking of this whole thing with technology. And we had an intern over the summer from KU [Stef Manchen]. And she was offsite. She was in Chicago and doing Instagram and Facebook and Twitter. And then you know, we were still going through the COVID thing at the time.

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And once we get through all of this, I want to sit down because I want to write something about again dealing with the grant what works and what doesn’t. Because I’m not sure that those are worth the investment. So what you have, at least at this point in time, you have a situation where print is still your bread and butter and, but yet so it really – how much time do you spend with the digital media? But yet, we’ve had a real -- I’ve seen a lot of businesses that are advertising on Facebook that never did before.

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So I think it’s accelerated that. So I think the trick is going to be to find the balance between those. Because our, you know, our revenue is down from what it was a year ago. And I have been going to -- it seems like it’s so much easier to reach out for new print products than it is to go to digital. I mean you just, you don’t have that equalization in revenue either. We are partnering with a small advertising agency in this area to offer our advertisers, Facebook and Google advertising programs.

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But again, that does not generate the – we’re doing it in partnership and cooperation with print. I mean it has to be, in our case, it has to be kind of a double print and digital. But again, that’s taking a lot of time because we’re having to prepare individual advertising plans for each advertiser. And also, we’re – there’s a couple of print products that I want to start because, you know, it’s the print products that are going to bring in the additional revenue weekly. I don’t think it’s going to be the digital aspect.

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So that probably tells you no more than what you knew when you asked me that question. But, it’s just, you know, I think we’re where everybody else is. I mean who knows what, who has an answer.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm.

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. It’s a very, very challenging time, especially with a small staff.

*Mayra Torres:* So, what were some of the most difficult moments in your career?

*Linda Denning:* Well, the worst is when you get it wrong – making a mistake is never a good thing. Some worse than others.

*[1:09:00]*

The worst one, the worst one I ever made, which was really kind of funny, too. There was a banker [John O’Leary Jr. of Luray] who is just the nicest man ever. And got this news – it wasn’t even, it wasn’t even an original story. It was a news release. And anyway, it came in and I was going through one of my, you know, got to get this done, got to get the – and so I wrote up this story. It was that he was named head of the Alumni Association. And I put at K-State. And went through this whole thing. It got in the paper. And he was named alumni president at KU.

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And fortunately, he had a really good sense of humor. And we talked about it later. And of course, I was just, I was like, oh God, I’m so sorry. And he said, you know, he said that was the neatest thing. He said, “I heard from people, from classmates that I hadn’t seen since graduation.” So it kind of sort of turned out OK. But nobody wants to make a mistake … especially if it makes somebody look bad – the other thing is having to call the family of someone, especially a child who has lost – that’s just the worst.

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And some families want to talk about what’s happened and some families find it very offensive that somebody is trying to get a hold of them. So I mean of course you don’t know how it’s going to go. And, yeah. That’s really bad. That’s – that’s a difficult assignment to have to fulfill.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. On the opposite side what have been some of your proudest moments or your favorite ones from your career?

*[1:12:00]*

*Linda Denning:* I love getting a special angle on a story that maybe somebody else didn’t have. Like, I’m trying to think of something – I can’t think of any examples but, you know, I always looked for some special angle on a story that maybe another reporter wouldn’t have and that was when covering north central and northwest Kansas …

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Back in the day when my job was just the best job ever, we did a lot of traveling outside of our circulation area. If there was something like -- one of the big stories that I covered at *The Journal* was years ago Kansas was in a group that was tasked with building a low-level nuclear waste site. And the question was where is the low-level nuclear waste site going to go? And it was beginning to look like it was either going to go in north central or northwest Kansas. But so we covered that. I went to meetings in New Orleans. I went to – Louisiana was in the coalition of states.

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I followed them around everywhere. So you know, *The Journal* went. They really, really did have a strong, strong emphasis on editorial as did all of the Harris papers. But I said oh, this is trying to – the person that trained me at *The Journal* was Jim Suber who is still -- he’s retired now, but he worked for *The Topeka Capital Journal* for a lot of years as an ag writer and columnist. And Jim had this incredible knack for networking.

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And, and that was – he was networking before that became a thing. And, and that’s the only way you could cover all of these counties because a lot of times we were a one-person department. Somebody was on vacation. If they were a little bit, if *The Journal* was trying to save a few bucks in editorial, usually the area, second area or third area person would be the first one to go, but Jim had all of these contacts and really built a template for me when he left that, you know, I – there was hardly a county --

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in fact, I’m not sure there was a county that I couldn’t call, pick up the phone and call somebody and say what’s going on? And I would know within minutes what was going on in a county. So that, that was very beneficial, as far as finding those different angles on stories because, you know, I just – I knew so many people out in the area. And that was so valuable and helped me tremendously in my job at *The Journal*.

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm. Did you belong to any professional news organizations? Which ones and why?

*Linda Denning:* Professional organizations?

*[1:17:00]*

*Mayra Torres:* Mm-hmm.

*Linda Denning:* Well, Kansas Press Association is probably the one that I got most involved in. I used to – when I first came to Kansas, I belonged to the Women’s Press Association, which is now – what is that now? Women in Communication or, I don’t know. But yeah. KPA is pretty much – I love being involved with KPA. But there’s also, you know, as a newspaper publisher, I think a lot of your time has to be devoted to organizations, local organizations.

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And so I try to fill in. If I’m going to join something, I try to make it local or some organization that has an impact on rural Kansas.

*Mayra Torres:* What are your memories of attending KPA conventions?

*Linda Denning:* Just that, just the fellowship between the people who attend the conventions.

*[1:19:00]*

Sometimes, especially in rural areas, you’re pretty isolated from maybe other people who have insight into what your opportunities and challenges are. And, you know, KPA provides a real, a real opportunity to talk to other publishers to exchange ideas to find out that what’s happening in your part of the world is not that unique, and I always felt kind of revitalized after I’d come home from a KPA convention. Like OK, got my second wind, and, I think that’s, that’s the best thing about the KPA conventions.

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I’m not sure how that is going to materialize going forward. We had the KPA convention be a Zoom this time, which was, which was great because, again, I learned a lot. I mean, there’s the educational aspect, too. Just, in addition to, you know, networking with your colleagues, it’s always good to learn something, which to me is another reason why I’m doing what I’m doing. I love learning. There is no better place to be than at a newspaper. It’s an education that never ends.

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You’re always -- you always know more tomorrow than you knew today … and that’s one of the great aspects of it, I think.

*Mayra Torres:* Was there a particular moment early in your career where you realized I’m a real journalist now?

*Linda Denning:* I don’t remember just thinking, “Wow, I’m a real journalist now.” I remember, again, I remember the first story, first byline story, I ever wrote for *The Journal*. And it got on page one. Again, that society thing – and I don’t even remember how it happened.

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It was during the days of Johnny Carson on late night. And he, Carson, had seen something in some obscure newspaper that there was a toilet paper shortage, you know, kind of like the COVID thing, but it wasn’t COVID then. And anyway, our assignment editors decided this would be an interesting story that we should call the stores and see if they were experiencing this. And of course, I got the assignment. And, OK. So I’m supposed to do this story about the toilet paper shortage that isn’t there, according to the store owners I’m talking to.

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So I started off, I started off writing it like Carson would have written it. Anyway, it worked. It sounds -- it sounds odd, but it worked. And anyway, it ended up as my first bylines story on page one was about a toilet paper shortage.

*Mayra Torres:* *[Laughs]*

*Linda Denning:* But, you know, it did get me noticed that oh, well, gee. That was pretty good. Maybe she can do more than toilet paper. So, that I do remember.

*Mayra Torres:* Did you ever consider quitting journalism to do something else?

*Linda Denning:* No. Not seriously.

*[1:24:00]*

… I just love doing what I did at *The Journal*. I mean it was like that job was everything I could have asked for. But, looking back on my college days, you know, my dad was not real keen on me going into journalism because he didn’t think it was really a very ladylike, I guess, profession. But some of the things that – like I covered, I covered a lot of ag stuff so I hung out with ag economists a lot. I covered a lot of water issues.

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And I wish and I hope, I hope this is the case now. When I was in college, I would have been interested in ag economics. I would have been interested in water law. Those were issues that later on I was exposed to. And I think this is something I really could have enjoyed doing and then I thought back to when I was in college. My counselors would no more have said, “Oh, well, what are you interested in?” or what are you, you know. I wish there had been more of an opportunity there to explore different things. I mean one of the reasons I went into journalism was because it wasn’t the 9 to 5 job.

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I wanted something that was a little bit more than the 9 to 5 job. I taught for a very short time and, again, I really enjoyed teaching. And heaven knows nobody deserves our respect and admiration more than teachers. But I just, I wanted something different, and I was lucky enough that when I was younger somebody introduced me to journalism and that’s the route I went.

*[1:27:00]*

*Mayra Torres:* What do you see as the biggest moments in Kansas journalism history?

*Linda Denning:* Oh I, is there just one moment?

*Mayra Torres:* I’m sure there’s a ton of them.

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. I don’t know, I just saw the documentary on William Allen White that the Kansas Newspaper Foundation participated in. It was on PBS the other night. And I think his – William Allen White standing up to the Klan was significant.

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But there have been other moments that, you know, I think Kansas has over the years -- a lot of the newspaper editors and publishers have been very progressive and have done things that have supported issues and causes that were ahead of their time in many cases. And I think that really, really has added to the character of the state. I don’t know. As far as a special moment, I really, I got nothing.

*Mayra Torres:* It’s all good. Well, it looks like this is the end of part three.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Bradley Yendro:* This is Bradley Yendro. Today is September – or Oct. 9, 2020. I am interviewing Linda Denning of *the Ellsworth County Independent*, for Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists project. This is part four, and this interview is taking place remotely due to COVID-19 pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Press – the Kansas Press Association.

Awesome. So – so we're startin' off with, what was the newsroom environment like at places you worked? How did men in the newsroom treat women journalists throughout your career, and how did men outside of the newsroom treat women journalists throughout your career?

*Linda Denning:* You know, that question was kind of asked but in a different way yesterday.

*[0:01:00]*

And I always think about it – I live about 45 minutes from where I work, so that's what I was thinking about last night as I was going home. When I started, it was 1972, and that doesn't seem like it's been that long ago. So, you wouldn't think that there would be that much difference between then and now, and in some ways, there is a difference. In some ways, there isn't, as we've been seeing on the national news. But, *[sighs]* you know, when I started, there was always – the guys made jokes.

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I mean, for example, they had a sweater contest when I started. The guys in the newsroom had this sweater contest, and they would vote, you know, in the wintertime which women reporters looked best in a sweater, stuff like that, which – I can deal with stuff like that. I mean, that's just – I can deal with that. I wish it didn't happen, but I can deal with it.

What really ticked me off royally *[laughs]* was – and I – again, I went into this – told about this experience yesterday when I would be assigned a story, and then all of a sudden the editors would realize that –

*[0:03:00]*

they had inadvertently assigned me a pretty major story, and they would come over and say, "You know, maybe we'd better give this to one of the guys." And that happened. I – fortunately, to their credit, when I said, "You know what? I think I can handle this," they let me handle it. I don't know if that was because I was intimidating at 24. I don't know why that was, but I usually managed to get around that. But just the fact that it was a consideration that, you know, if it had something to do with economics, if it had something to do with agriculture, some major complicated issue, all of a sudden that was a man's field.

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And the other side of that is, I never worked anywhere else, so I don't know how women were being treated elsewhere. I mean, I know that even though there were a lot of episodes like that, I also knew that if I worked hard and did well, did stories well, was accurate, they were well written, that I would have opportunities that – you know, that once I proved myself, I was in pretty good shape. But, on the outside – on the outside, I covered agriculture.

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That was one of my beats, and that was not something that a lot of women covered in 1972, and especially in – what was it? It would've been – I don't remember what – in the late '70s, the American Ag Movement started. That was the tractorcades. That was – the farmers went back to Washington. They went to Topeka. They protested wherever they could find enough space on the road to get their tractors to protest.

And that also involved – because not everybody – not all farmers were involved in the American Ag Movement. That also meant I went to a lot of meetings like the National –

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Association of Wheat Growers, which is really a big deal, because they drew in ag people from all over the world. I remember there were people there from Canada and European Union in Wichita. They had the convention in Wichita, and, you know, I loved covering that stuff. It was so interesting, and the people were so interesting.

But there were times that – when I first started covering agriculture, the most frequent question I was asked when I ended up – when I would enter a meeting, walk into a meeting, was, "Now, whose secretary are you? Who do you – *[laughs]* who're you with?" and eventually I got past that, too, and I – again – and I mentioned this yesterday.

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My boss, before he left *the Journal,* was Jim Suber, who for many years was the ag writer and columnist for the *Capital Journal* and Jim really taught me how to interact with people and how to interact with farmers, although I was raised on a farm. So, it probably wasn't that hard, but, you know, he really was just phenomenal at networking, before networking was – I think you can get a major in that now, can't you?

But, anyway, yeah, women were pretty much – I remember I had a guy. I was covering a tornado one time in Lincoln County, and I'm sure the man has passed away by now, or I would name him to embarrass him publicly.

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But, he – I was going around talking to people, and he was sitting there – and, granted, he had just been through a shock, so maybe he wasn't totally clicking like he normally would. But he said, "What're you doin' here? Why aren't you at home takin' care of your husband and your kids?" And I – that really shocked me because I had never had anybody be quite that blatant *[laughs]* about the fact that I wasn't a man. But – and that's changed, but I think it's maybe changed in the fact that it's gone underground a little bit more, and maybe not so much in the newsrooms as outside the newsrooms.

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My daughter worked for the [Hillary] Clinton campaign in 2016.

[**Post-production addition:** She organized in a number of states, eventually spending the months right before the election in Ohio.]

And so, I guess I paid more attention, first of all, first woman of a major political party to run for president. I literally cried when I cast my vote 'cause I didn't think I'd ever be able to vote for a woman for president. And then my daughter had a small role to play in that, but it's – it was really moving for me. But, you know, listening to the coverage of that campaign, Trump really got a pass on that. I think the press, the national press, did a really crummy job of covering him, and I think they did it – a lot of it at her expense.

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You know, she had to justify her position, and all he had to do was say he'd taken a position, when half the time he hadn't. And it's still – women have come a very long way, but I think they have quite a ways to go, and I think that was -- some of the comments since the vice presidential debate I think – I think that's been made very clear the behavior of Senator [Kamala] Harris – there was an expectation there. She was walking a much, much smaller tightrope than what [Mike] Pence was.

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And he got away with a lot of stuff that she would've been just vilified for because she was a woman and a Black woman at that. So, anyway, that's my – do I sound hostile? I hope not. I'm not. I just –

*Bradley Yendro:* Yeah, that was – those were some amazing stories that you told.

*Linda Denning:* – I just don't think we're there yet.

*Bradley Yendro:* So, for the next question, kinda going off of that, what were career advancement options for women during your career? Like, how could you progress your career?

*Linda Denning:* I think it was harder. Again, you know, there weren't that many women in leadership positions.

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I – *[laughs]* I know you're gonna ask me later on about the Hall of Fame, and, a couple years ago we had a retirement at the Kansas Press Association, and Doug Anstaett and I walked through the hall, where all the pictures of the hall-of-famer recipients are, and I – as we were walking through, I looked up, and I said, "Gee, what's missing here? *[Gasps]* I know. There aren't any women." *[Laughs]* He kinda laughed, and he said, "Well, there will be." And you know, and Doug's been very supportive of that. So I don't – but I just tell that story to – there're just like rows and rows of *[laughs]* men publishers. And, anyway, even given that –

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I think, you know, I never thought to myself I can't advance because I'm a woman.

I'm a writer, first and foremost, a reporter/writer first and foremost, before I'm a publisher, before I'm an editor, before – that's what I love doing, and that's – the job I had at *the Journal* and in the good-old days before we – our publishers became less competitive and more bottom-line-oriented, was the greatest job in the world. I mean, it was – I could not have asked for a better job.

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And I always knew that probably if I wanted to move up, all I had to do was say, "Hey, you know, can I go over –" in fact, there were – we had one editor in particular who had kinda made it his life's goal to get me over on the editor's side, and I just didn't wanna go. *[Laughs]* I was having too much fun, and, so there was opportunity, but you had to be good. I mean, there weren't – I think there was just – whether it was conscious or not, there was more of an expectation there. You really had to be good, and you had to work very hard, and maybe a little bit harder than – on the male side, it just kind of came more naturally. *[Laughs]* You just kind of naturally moved up.

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With women, it was more – I think you really had to work at it.

*Bradley Yendro:* Well, like you said, that there're some ways to advance, but what were some advantages of being a woman journalist throughout your career? What were some of the positives?

*Linda Denning:* Well, especially – I hate to admit it. There were times, especially covering agriculture – I always found this really interesting. I can't think of anything that is more dependent upon women than agriculture. *[Laughs]* I mean, yeah, I know the guys are out there tilling the soil and doing all that stuff.

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But it's – the wife is probably the one who's got the town job, and now men, too, probably both of 'em, but, in those days, when the American Ag Movement was going really strong, they had an office in all 105 counties. And the women staffed the offices 'cause the husbands were out doing the farm work and stuff. But the women staffed the offices, and you would call the office, and an office, say, in, I don't know, Norton County, Rawlins County, somewhere, with a question, and one of the wives would answer the phone, and they would say, "Oh, OK.

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Well, let me take your name and number. I'm gonna have to have my husband call you back." And it might not even be like, "What's your opinion on the latest farm bill?" It just – you know, “When you're having a meeting there next week? *[Laughs]* When's it gonna be?”

But even – there seemed to be **~~a~~** an attitude kind of with women, too, that they really had to step lightly because they didn't want to make their husbands feel like they were trying to usurp their – *[laughs]* their authority. I don't know. But it was – and yet you knew that as far as work, as far as responsibility –

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there – at some level, there was a real partnership because I can't imagine the farm working without some kind of partnership on the people who own it, who operate it. And so, I'm sorry. I really wandered on that one.

*Bradley Yendro:* No – no, you're good. No, you were good.

*Linda Denning:* Where was I going with this question? *[Laughs]*

*Bradley Yendro:* We were just talkin' about some advantages of being a woman journalist and – in your career. And while you're thinkin' of that, what're some other disadvantages as well?

*Linda Denning:* Oh. Well, the attitude, yeah, the attitude … one of the advantages before I actually started off of that was because of that – what I perceived as a feeling on the part of a lot of the farmers that I had encountered, you know, to still maintain their dignity. And there's nothing wrong with that, and that was a horrible time because here you are.

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You're head of a business that three, four, five generations of your farmer – or of your family have been involved in, and here you are. You're looking at perhaps losing everything. And so that was – there were just so many emotions involved in that.

But, that said, I also knew I could get information by pretending like I didn't know anything. If worst came to worst, that was not my first go-to, but occasionally, I would encounter a farmer who just didn't – and so I would say, "You know, I'm just really having trouble understanding this."

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And I don't know if he would've accepted that from a man. He had absolutely no problem accepting it from a woman. so, *[sighs]* I don't know how else to put this. It sounds – just kind of downplaying what you knew *[laughs]* was sometimes beneficial, and I think it usually worked because they didn't expect a woman to know that much about farming at least. So, I guess that was an advantage.

… it's really funny, 'cause my father did not – he was not real excited when I told him what I wanted to do.

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He really had – I think he had this stereotype in his mind about, you know, newsrooms being just horrible places. And – but even given that, I mean, even though he wasn't really happy with my choice, he also managed to instill in me that there wasn't anything I couldn't do that I didn't wanna do, that if I wanted to do it, I needed to get out there, and I needed to work hard, and I needed to do my best, get it right the first time, all those things. And so I think that's kind of the attitude I've always had that, you know –

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and from an intellectual standpoint, I think that women have a ways to go. But on an individual standpoint, I think if I choose to do something, I'm gonna do it. I mean, it's – not trying is not an option. So, I guess that's how I always managed to survive the "And whose secretary are you now?" *[laughter]* and all of that stuff because I just knew that there was a way. I just had to find it.

*Bradley Yendro:* So for the next one, were there any times during your career when you felt uncomfortable as a woman journalist, whether it was in the newsroom or with sources?

*[0:23:00]*

*Linda Denning:* Yeah, I had a situation. I told my daughter about this. I had a situation with someone, and I told my daughter about it.

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And she said – she said, "Mom, that wasn't sexual harassment; that was assault." And I said, "Oh, yeah, you know, you're right." And nothing – nothing came of it because, again, I was – I figured I could take care of myself, and I always did. But, yeah, yeah, there were situations – not a lot of them, like, one or two that, uh –

*Bradley Yendro:* Well, I'm sorry to hear that.

*Linda Denning:* – I was very uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as the person after *[laughs]* – after I made it very clear, yeah. Yeah. And that wasn't – that certainly wasn't just me. It was – anyway, next question. *[Laughs]*

*Bradley Yendro:* So, what was it like trying to balance home and work during your career, little bit of a different way?

*[0:25:00]*

*Linda Denning: [laughs]* It was – you know, when you're going through it, you just do it because that's your life, and – it was really – my husband, his best friend worked at *the Journal*. That's how we met, and so he had a pretty good understanding of what it was like. And – and everybody knew my husband and just adored him. I mean, he was – he was just a great, great guy. And so there was a lot of back-and-forth, but it was still difficult sometimes, um –

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because, as you know, it's not a 9-to-5 job, and I remember he was away one time. He had a business meeting he had to go to in Topeka. So he was gone for a week, and the Kansas Water Office was writing the Kansas water plan at the time, and it was a huge deal, and I'd been covering it. And, all of a sudden, like at 3 on a weekday, we found out that – it was when Mike Hayden was governor. We found out that Mike Hayden was going to be in Saline County –

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and he was going to announce funding for the water plan, how he was going to get funding for the water plan. And *[laughs]* I'm thinking, oh, my gosh.

Anyway, I immediately call – I had my son then, who was just an infant, and I called my mother-in-law. I called our neighbors across the street, and everybody had something. They just couldn't do it. Anyway, I ended up taking Matt with me to the water meeting, and, literally, people held him – like, members of the Kansas Water Authority, *[laughs]* the women were. And Matt was just a doll, I mean, huge hazel eyes and blond hair, and, everybody was fighting over him to hold him.

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But, so, while they held him, I was taking notes on what the governor was saying, and that fortunately didn't happen weekly.

But occasionally it did, and, you know, the other side of – the kids really got a great education. I mean, both of my kids were there when Bob Dole announced that he was gonna run for president. Matt, my son, who's my oldest, still talks about that. He would've been in the sixth grade, and *[laughs]* when … Dole came through town, he did a walkthrough, kind of a tour of downtown Russell, and so they put reporters in different places.

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And I ended up at Banker's Department Store, where Bob Dole bought all of his suits and his father bought his overalls.

And, anyway, before Dole came through, Matt had to use the restroom. So, you know, the – Banker sent him back to the restroom, and next thing I know, the Secret Service is coming through, *[laughs]* and – to make sure there're only people who're supposed to be there. And they find Matt in the bathroom, and now this poor kid. I mean, they all – Secret Service, you could always tell 'em because they wore reflective sunglasses. And so Matt is just terrified. It was kind of like the Men in Black. It's kinda like – *[laughs]* they're saying, "You've gotta get out of here right now," and Matt's saying, "Well, I can't leave.

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My mother told me I had to stay here," and they said, "We don't care who –" you know, and they're dragging the poor kid out. And, Dean Banker, who owned the department store, knew our family. Actually, my husband's family was originally from the Hays/Russell area, and so he knew us. And he stepped in, and fortunately, Matt wasn't hauled off in handcuffs by the Secret Service.

But it was – *[laughter]* and he still remembers that, and he still tells that story sometimes. And – but it was just – you know, the kids got a real education. They're both – like I said, my daughter worked for the Clinton campaign. She worked for Sharice Davids campaign.

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She just returned to Kansas to work for the Department of Administration, and she's very involved in politics. My son is not so involved in politics except from the standpoint that he probably knows as much – I mean, he really – he kinda follows politics like a lot of people follow football. *[Laughs]* … I think both of those kids picked it up from the fact that I covered it a lot as they were growing up. And sometimes they went with me, whether they wanted to or not. So, they always got extra credit at school, too. They did, uh –

*Bradley Yendro:* Sweet. So, kind of working with everything that we've talked about, what do women bring to journalism?

*[0:32:00]*

*Linda Denning:* I think maybe they bring a – I don't know. I thought about this question a lot, too, because – and I'm not sure I can answer it after the 2016 election because *[laughs]* I think maybe they bring a more personal aspect to journalism as far as, you know, maybe there's a little bit more emphasis on empathy and – but –

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I've always tried to teach my kids, especially my daughter, that, to me, one of the biggest sins is if you're a woman and you have been successful – your job, your responsibility is to reach back and help others. Hold your hand out to help others. Under no circumstances do you pull the ladder up after you … I don't understand why we're our worst enemies sometimes.

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When the most recent women's movement was started back in what would've been the early '70s, I think the feminists made a horrible mistake in that they did not open their movement up to everyone … They probably should've been – and I think that was the moment that there was division between women.

[**Post-production addition:** They didn’t show as much respect as they should have for women who preferred to stay at home and care for their families.]

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And I don't think that's ever quite gone away.

So, I'm not sure you could make just a general statement about women bring this to journalism and men don't, and … again, from the standpoint that, you know, especially if you're talking about things like discrimination and systemic racism and those kinds of things, maybe women can relate a little bit more than – but even that's – even that's not true because, you know, obviously a Black, African-American reporter can relate to that.

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A male reporter can relate to that. So I don't know. I don't know if that's a valid question.

*Bradley Yendro:* Yeah, that's --

*Linda Denning:* And that's my way of not answering you, okay? *[Laughs]*

*Bradley Yendro:* I mean, something a little bit more broad and kind of in the place right now is, how do you view the state of women journalism today?

*Linda Denning:* I think it's great. I think there are really some top-notch – I mean, just really, really good, good women journalists. There are opportunities, probably broader opportunities, than there were, you know, back in the '60s and '70s.

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Again, keep going back to the 2016 election because that was – what do I know? I'm sitting out here in Ellsworth, Kansas, but, to me, it was just a real eye-opener that even though you had women who were in these positions, it didn't seem to make a difference. And I never talked to anybody specifically about that, and I'd like to because I think Clinton got a really bad deal. I mean, when she – you know, *[laughs]* I just –

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she was just held to a different standard and probably four years earlier, too, when she ran against Obama. But – but, yeah, so women have a lot more opportunities. I'm just not sure it's made that big a difference as far as coverage and as far as how women are portrayed in the press.

*Bradley Yendro:* So then as young journalists are coming up, what advice would you give to high school and college female aspiring journalists?

*Linda Denning:*  Okay, number one, be curious. and maybe this is just a parochial thing that – *[laughs]* that I'm dealing with.

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But I see kids – I've had kids go to work for me, and it's like – well, okay, here's a great example. Several years ago, Wilson, Kansas, basketball team – we had a sports editor who was always going to Wilson to cover the basketball games. And *[laughs]* he got sick. The reporter got sick. It was a man. I wanna make that perfectly clear. It was a male reporter, and, anyway, I called my son, who had helped us out every so often. And I said, you know, "Can you go to Wilson? We need this game covered," and, so *[laughs]* he went to Wilson, covered the game.

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He came home and writes a story, and as we're driving home from work one – like, the next night or something, he said, "Hey, I wanna ask you something," and I said, "Yeah?" and he said, "You know, Wilson has a one-armed basketball player." I'm like, "What?" He said, "Is – that's a story, right?" And I said, "yes." *[Laughs]* Anyway, he did a story. But our sports editor had been covering this team all season, and never occurred to him that a one-armed basketball player was a story. And so we did a story on it, and then, I mean, everybody in the world picked it up. *[laughs]* Oh, for heaven sake. Be curious. Just be curious.

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You don't have to necessarily have a degree in journalism. I don't –this'll probably get cut by the journalism department, but I don't think you necessarily have to have a degree in journalism. But you have to be interested in the world around you. You have to be interested in politics. You have to be interested in how county government works. You have to be interested in your neighbors' lives. If somebody in their family gets COVID, you've gotta have some empathy for those people, too, because the story that you need to write needs to convey what they're feeling. You just need to have a broad education and interest in so many things, which, you know, that's why I loved my job so much at the *Journal*.

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I'm probably one of the few people in the world who has actually read an entire farm bill, but, oddly enough, that is part of – I was not confined to one subject. I really studied hard. Agriculture, water, nuclear waste. You know, those were all pretty complex subjects that I covered. And I loved that. I loved learning about those things – writing about them. And you've just – it goes back to curiosity.

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You just have to be interested in the world around you and maybe wanna make a little bit of a difference.

*Bradley Yendro:* It was a great way to wrap that section. So, how did you gain confidence in your ability to be a journalist/work in the – the media industry?

*Linda Denning:* Oh, gosh. *[laughs]* I think I was – OK, another story. So I was 23 years old when I went to work for *the Journal*, and I had just celebrated my 24th birthday, and one of the sheriffs in our circulation area –

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it's Friday, right – got into a ton of trouble and the attorney general ended up involved, and then – OK, how did this go? The sheriff was having an affair with the dispatcher, his dispatcher, who also happened to be his undersheriff's wife. So you can imagine morale wasn't real high in this – his department and then that was leading to other problems, and then the undersheriff tried to commit suicide, and that just blew everything up.

So, I don't know how it happened, but I somehow got a hold of this story.

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And so I'm doing this story and so I'd been covering it, and – from a news angle that the attorney general's involved. Well – so the attorney general came back and said, you know, stupidity isn't a crime, *[laughs]* I mean, basically. That's what the report said. And, so when it came back, the sheriff actually called me, and he said, "The report's back. I've been cleared, kinda-sorta, and I'd like to talk to you." And so, I'm thinking, OK.

So, anyway, I go out to the sheriff's office, and we sit down, and we are sitting there.

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I am this 24-year-old, hardly any experience. I come from a small town in Indiana. I'm sure stuff like this happened in Indiana, but I was not aware of it. And then the sheriff was probably in his 40s at that point, 40s, early 50s, and here I am. I'm sitting there talking to the sheriff about his love life, and I'm thinking, "If I can do this, I can do anything. *[Laughs]* This is, like, the most uncomfortable interview I will ever have in my life." So that was kind of the start of – it doesn't get any worse than this. *[Laughs]* I can do anything.

*Bradley Yendro:* So, startin' off on this.

*[0:47:00]*

What kind of journalism awards did you win in your career, and then what impact did that have on you?

*Linda Denning:* I received awards from various organizations for, you know, coverage of those industries. TheHarris news– the Harris chain used to have annual awards, and I think they would have, like, enterprise awards and writing awards, and there was a period that I would –

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I usually won those 'til one of the publishers objected and said, "Can we just kinda retire her from the competition?" and, then, you know, KPA awards over the years just – I never – *[laughs]* you know, this is what I tell my employees – awards are really important to my employees, and that's great. I mean, that's great, but I also tell them that I've judged a lot of awards contests, and so much is dependent on the judge's mood, the – *[laughs]* what the judge's experience has been in the –there's just so many –

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variables that – and I remember, one contest, Mike Corn, who worked for years for *the Hays Daily News*, and then for Harris Enterprises – we were always in competition because he was an ag writer, too.

And so one year we were in competitions at contest, and the awards come back, and Mike beat me, which, you know, he did a lot. I mean, he was really good, and – *[laughs]* and – but the comment from the judge was, "How could I not have given the ag award to somebody with the last name of Corn?" I'm thinking, OK, well, that pretty much cements my *[laughs]* impression of how much of a value I should put on awards.

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They're really nice. I mean, yeah, everybody likes to be recognized, but I'm not sure, short of a Pulitzer, *[laughs]* that it's something you should build your whole career around.

*Bradley Yendro:* What were your initial emotions when you heard that you were being inducted into the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame?

*Linda Denning:* I thought about – obviously it's an honor, and I'm really touched, and it makes me feel good to know that, you know, my peers voted for me. But I also think about – my first thought was actually of Whitley Austin. Whitley Austin was my first publisher, and he was tough.

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He was really tough. After all these years, I still cannot refer to him as – as Whitley. I call him Mr. Austin. And he actually worked for William Allen White. Mr. Austin was from Emporia and worked for William Allen White, and I thought, oh, my gosh. You know, I don't even – *[sighs]* I don't even compare to – *[laughs]* him.

When they announced, when the government announced they were gonna shut down Schilling Air Force Base in Salina, Mr. Austin went to Washington and lobbied on behalf of the city of Salina, and I think of how much influence he had and his contributions to the city.

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I'm not anywhere near – I do not have a resume like that. But the times are different, too. He was coming at it from a much stronger position than what I think a lot of newspapers have today … newspapers are still so important, but they also do not have as strong a voice, and that's just part of how things are now just, you know, with the internet, with everything else that's going on.

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I also thought about all of the people that I've worked with over the years who contributed so much to journalism in Kansas and will never have the opportunity to get this kind of recognition. And I wish there was some way to – I've talked about – in previous sessions, I talked about John Schmeidler who was one – the kinda self-appointed guardian of the *Salina Journal* newsroom for many years, and was really terrifying if – *[laughs]* you know, I mean, to this day I cannot bring myself to split an infinitive, and those people who literally –

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made their jobs their number-one priority and their communities. And, anyway, I – just a lot of reflection, I guess.

*Bradley Yendro:* Also, like, building off of that, how does it feel to be one of only a select few women to be chosen for the hall of fame – fame?

*Linda Denning:* I think there're gonna be a lot more. *[Laughs]* I think there're gonna be a lot more … I'm sure there were former executive directors who also were very supportive of women in their role in journalism, but I'm just gonna focus on Doug.

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A lot of women to the board, a lot more women involved in – I think he really has done a great job in bringing women into the process. And KPA has a – has its first woman executive director now in Emily Bradbury, and she is doing a phenomenal job … when I was KPA president, that was certainly one of my goals was, you know, if we had an opening on the board, I knew there was a really qualified woman out there somewhere to fill it. So –

*Bradley Yendro:* When did you serve as KPA president?

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And then what were your priority –

*Linda Denning:* 2010. *[Sighs]* I just – mostly my priorities were – at that time, doing the best I could, the best KPA could, at building a foundation that would help the newspapers move into the new – kinda the new atmosphere. That's really when technology really was becoming even a bigger thing than it had been. And there's always the public-notice situation.

*[0:57:00]*

I think the goal of every president of KPA since maybe 2000 has been to *[laughs]* maintain public notices in newspapers –

– and just, oh, kinda provide an – one of the really – one of the really valuable services of KPA is just the networking opportunities, just knowing there's an organization there that understands what you're going through. *[Laughs]* That doesn't sound like it should be on the mission statement, but it is. It's a strong part of, I think, what KPA does.

*Bradley Yendro:* So what were some of the best parts during your time as KPA president?

*[0:58:00]*

*Linda Denning: [sighs]* Well, let's see. I found out that Missouri apparently fought an entirely different Civil War than what Kansas did. *[laughs]* … From the education standpoint, that – that was a period that we were trying to find a way to protect the content of newspapers because, well, in fact, just this week, we did a story on how the local prison in Ellsworth is trying to protect its employees and the community as a whole, employees, inmates and the community as a whole against COVID.

And I – imagine my surprise.

*[0:59:00]*

I mean, it was kind of a – it was an enterprise piece … put a lot of work into it, so imagine my surprise when I looked on my cellphone yesterday and saw that it was on the Google news feed, the entire story, which was supposed to be behind a paywall on our website. But – so that was an issue, and I – unfortunately, we never figured out a way to address it. and, what else? Public notices, ended up testifying before a committee on public notices, and just – you know, just –

*[1:00:00]*

again, taking phone calls from members and trying to especially share some of the ideas that newspapers have that can help other newspapers.

*Bradley Yendro:* So kind of spinning off into a little bit of a different topic, what would you define as a successful career in journalism?

*Linda Denning:* I don't know. I guess that comes from –

*Bradley Yendro:* Feel like there's a lot of variety.

*Linda Denning:* – both sides. Yeah. I think everybody probably would have a different answer, but I feel like I've made a little bit of a difference.

*[1:01:00]*

I'm not going to say I made a huge difference because I – that's probably not for me to judge. But I think in some ways, I look back at when Sharon Montague and I – who was a colleague at *the Salina Journal* – when we started *the Ellsworth County Independent* – I have made the argument that Ellsworth would not have a newspaper if it had not been for Sharon and I and the people who supported this and our endeavor because, you know, the temptation, I think, even though at the time Ellsworth had the *Reporter* – which, by the way, celebrates its 150th anniversary next year.

*[1:02:00]*

Ellsworth had the *Reporter*; however, I think just the way the journalism environment has gone, I suspect that there would've been huge pressure to combine that newspaper, combine the Ellsworth paper with the Great Bend paper. And that didn't happen. I'm speculating here on all of this, but that didn't happen because, number one, we started *the Independent*, so they couldn't – you know, they would've lost everything if they would've consolidated Ellsworth.

*[1:03:00]*

And, number two – and when we merged with the *Reporter*, it – again – it was as an independent paper, and that actually guaranteed that Ellsworth would have a newspaper for a great many years to come. So I guess from that aspect, I feel like I've had a successful career, and I – but mostly I've just had a career I enjoyed. I really made the right decision.

*Bradley Yendro:* So what qualities do you think are the most important ones for career advancement in journalism? What would help you have the best career possible?

*[1:04:00]*

You said curiosity earlier –

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. And I still … you could measure that by how many promotions you get and all of that, and I never did. So, if you're really ambitious and really want to, you know, be a – *[laughs]* I don't know be at the top of AP someday or *New York Times* or – I probably am not a good person to talk to because I just wanted to do something that I enjoyed doing. And I wanted to do something that was important, at least in my mind was important.

*[1:05:00]*

And what I've done certainly fit my criteria for a really good career choice. So, again, it – I guess it kinda depends on what your priorities are.

*Bradley Yendro:* Yeah. So, since you've been in the journalism field, how has it changed since you've entered, both in terms of technology and content?

*Linda Denning:* Yesterday, we were having problems with tech – which is another reason I pushed this interview off until today. We were having computer issues, and – at one point, I turned to –

*[1:06:00]*

my computer person, and I said, "You know, I'm not sure going back to typewriters wouldn't be a bad idea." And, he said, "You know," he said, "I kinda feel the same way, and I do this for a living." *[Laughs]* And I – it seems to me like a lot of the tech people I meet are just always depressed, but I could be imagining that. But the technology has just – in some ways it's wonderful. I mean, I love being able to send pages to my computer, designing 'em on the computer and then sending 'em via computer. And that's all just great.

*[1:07:00]*

But it also eliminates jobs and good-paying jobs. I mean, those guys in the back shop – I don't know how long as a reporter, as a beginning reporter, you had to work to equal their salaries. But they did OK, and they were there forever, and then they would pass those jobs down to their kids. And that's – we sure lost that. So technology has kinda been a good thing and a bad thing.

*[sighs]* It's also made everything faster. I mean, deadlines have always been a major issue in newspapers, but with internet and with Facebook and – to be first, it's –

*[1:08:00]*

it's just a nightmare because you've got 15 people out there at an event with their cellphone. So it's kind of a shift in mindset, plus my staff is older, and they have to actually – I think for younger people, they just automatically talk about, you know, Facebook advertising, Google advertising. My people have to really think about it. *[Laughs]* It's like, "Oh, wait a minute. We can also do this for you," because we're still – print is still – we have not gotten beyond print, and I'm not sure I want to. I talked about how much I loved learning about agriculture and water issues and so many different things.

*[1:09:00]*

Technology just bores me to death. I have no interest in it, and I think I'm probably – this is beginning to sound like a retirement speech, but I just really don't. I don't care. I just – *[laughs]* but don’t care because I want my paper to survive.

So – and as far as news coverage, I think – I look at the stories that the *Kansas Reflector* is doing, the nonprofit that drew a lot of Kansas talent, you know, Tim Carpenter works for them.

*[1:10:00]*

He worked for years for the *Cap. Journal* and covered politics, and they have such a talented staff. Every one of those stories that they send across I think that's a story I would've done when I was at the Journal. Somehow the really hard coverage is moving away from newspapers, at least the smaller dailies. The *Journal* – *Salina Journal* – I don't know. They're down to almost nothing. They've sold their building. Oh, my gosh, Mr. Austin, who was publisher when that building opened sure is just spinning in his grave. You know, the press was moved out, everything sent to Hutch.

*[1:11:00]*

Salina's lost a lot, and I use Salina because that's the one I'm most familiar with. But a couple years ago, I moved from Ellsworth to Salina, and so I get a lot of feedback from people on their thoughts about the paper, and people still want their newspaper, and they're really angry that they're not getting it because, you know, all of those stories that, like, *Kansas* – nonprofits like *Kansas Reflector* are doing, those are invaluable stories, and they need to be done.

*[1:12:00]*

But in the old days, Salina would have done them. They would have done the stories with the benefit of telling their readers how those issues were going to affect them personally. And now it's not so much that way anymore. It's – how is it going to affect the state at large, and there's not a lot of local connection there between an issue and a particular area, especially the less-populated areas in the state.

*Bradley Yendro:* Building off of that a little bit, what are your thoughts on the state of journalism today, from both a national and state perspective?

*[1:13:00]*

*Linda Denning:* Well, that's – that pretty much sums up my feeling about the state perspective … I just went on my news feed. After saying that there isn't a lot of local connection, I did see that, like, *the Kansas Reflector* several weeks ago went out to Logan and did a story on the COVID cluster in Logan, which is an extremely small town in northwest Kansas.

*[1:14:00]*

And, *the* *Capital Journal* just did a story on the – John McClure's bike shop in Osborne. I had no idea how that even got on the radar, but he's a former state legislator, so maybe – *[laughs]* I don't know, maybe something through that.

But – so, you know, there is some of that going on. But there's just not a lot coming out of northwest Kansas, and there is much going on out there. I mean, for one thing, you know, we have a quarter of the state that is shedding population and has been for many, many years, and it's been written about, but it's not particularly being written about now. I think we're falling down on water coverage, again –

*[1:15:00]*

a hugely important issue to this state and just not seeing much about water.

As far as the national – I don't know what the answer is on the national. I'm not sure. I mean, I think the large newspapers are doing some wonderful investigative stuff, but I don't even know how you judge what's going on now. I mean, it's like – somebody said something about the presidential debate [between Donald Trump and Joe Biden], and that was, what, just a few days ago? It seems like it was months ago.

*[1:16:00]*

It's like I don't even know how you – it's just a news story a minute. I mean, it used to be that you could kind of –

*Bradley Yendro:* I feel like, though, this year has definitely been like that, too.

*Linda Denning:* \_have a news story. Now it's just – it's just insane. It's just chaos, which pretty much reflects what kind of leadership we have at the top.

*Bradley Yendro:* So do you have any concerns about the – the state of journalism currently?

*Linda Denning:* Yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing how they cover this presidential – well –

*Bradley Yendro:* No, it's probably 20 some days.

*Linda Denning:* Gee, it's not that far off, is it, November? Um –

*Bradley Yendro:* What a year.

*[1:17:00]*

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. *[Laughs]* They haven't had time to cover it, have they? Okay, that explains that. Yeah. I don't know, and I don't know how to solve the problem. I get so upset with Kansas publishers, and we have one or two who buy into the president's [Donald Trump’s] theory of the enemy-of-the-people theory [that members of the media are enemies of the people]. And you talk to –and they write stuff, and they support what the president says at the national level, and I said, "Don't you understand that people probably don't differentiate –

*[1:18:00]*

between what they're hearing at the national level and what they're getting at the local level that when – you know, when we're called enemy of the people, when we're called fake news that that hurts all of us? It's not just *The New York Times* and *the Washington Post*. It's all of us."

And they – *[sighs]* there is some of that going on in Kansas, and – and, it really, really irritates me because it's one thing to – it's one thing to criticize the press, and we all need that. I mean, we've all screwed up. We've – but most of the reporters I know, most of the editors I know, you know, they try to get it right.

*[1:19:00]*

They want to get it right. And if people had any idea how hard most newspapers work to get the right information, to – to deliver what they think their readers need to know, I mean, they would never criticize another newspaper ever again. We try every so often to explain to our readers why we did something that they think was pretty incredibly dumb, but – then you have some editorial writers who just – like I said, they just – every week they're in there sayin', "Oh, yeah, president's right."

*[1:20:00]*

Anyway, that's…

*Bradley Yendro:* Yeah, so, I mean –

*Linda Denning:* That's my take on that. *[Laughs]*

*Bradley Yendro:* Kinda the next question, we've been talkin' about it all day is how has the current presidential administration and upcoming election affected you as a journalist?

*Linda Denning:* It's really made me question how we cover things and not so much – probably not so much – well, yeah. *[Laughs]* Here's an example. I'm doing fact-checks now on letters to the editor, never used to do that unless it … I would say in our – you know, "Send me your letters," and I would say –

*[1:21:00]*

if we find something that is blatantly untrue, we will call you, and you can either change it or … that was so blatant that we just immediately saw it and said, no, this is – we need to call the letter-writer. But I am actually going through and – like, I have time to do this. I'm actually going through and checking letters because I've had it. *[Laughs]* I've just – I have just had it.

I'm tired of people turning masks [wearing masks during the 2020 pandemic] into a political issue.

*[1:22:00]*

I am tired of politics taking precedent over public safety. I am tired of the lack of civility, the lies, the – just tired of it. So, anyway, we're doing fact-checks on letters to the editors, and I've actually – there have been two letters that I've rejected out of hand and said there are so many misfactual and factual statements in this that I cannot run these letters as you have written them. And, of course that turns me into a socialist, you know, and so – who opposes the First Amendment 'cause, as you all know, all newspapers oppose the First Amendment, but it's just – I mean, it's gotta stop somewhere.

*[1:23:00]*

And maybe it's not making that much of a difference, but at least we're not perpetuating *[laughs]* it, and, you know, – as far as news coverage, it's not such an issue in that, with the exception of when we have – occasionally when we have a politician coming through town. We – there is one in particular, um –

*Bradley Yendro:* If you would like to, yeah, go right ahead.

*Linda Denning:* Would you like me to name him? I would be happy to.

*Bradley Yendro:* I said if you would like to, go right ahead.

*Linda Denning:* I'm sorry. What? Oh, that's Roger Marshall. *[laughs]* He tends to talk about – talk to Trump talking points, and, you know, he tells us he can't get any legislation passed because of Nancy Pelosi.

*[1:24:00]*

I don't think that does anybody any good. The – of course the contrast to that is [Sen.] Jerry Moran, who – even if you don't agree with Jerry Moran, he talks about the issues. He comes to a public meeting, and he talks about the issues. He doesn't talk about how evil Nancy Pelosi is or how all of the COVID figures are wrong and it's not really that big a deal. He talks about what legislation there is that's going to impact a local hospital. He talks about just things that really matter to voters.

*[1:25:00]*

And so when – in cases like that – if we have a politician who comes to town and just says something that isn't true or is – I don't – I don't know what word I should use, but misrepresents the situation, we'll point it out in a news story. So, actually, it's a lot harder than it used to be. We're doing a heck of a lot more work than we used to.

*Bradley Yendro:* So, go to the next one. What do you think should be the mission of media today, and what's the media's role in democracy? Mm-hmm.

*Linda Denning:* Just to get as close to the truth as you can.

*[1:26:00]*

And I wish that more people paid attention, but, you know, it's the old, what, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Yeah, we just need to make sure that the truth is out there, available somewhere. So if people don't wanna read it – that's their choice, but it's our responsibility to do the best job we can to make it available to them.

*Bradley Yendro:* Then the – for the next one, kind of – kind of a personal and in timely question. How has COVID-19 affected you as a journalist?

*Linda Denning:* I'm exhausted, *[laughs]* as probably, what, 95 percent of the population can say.

*[1:27:00]*

I don't – that's something else I'm trying to figure out. It's like in March, when the governor [Laura Kelly] shut down the state – OK, so there's a lot of places that we don't have. You know, they're not out there with activities and stuff. We're working twice as hard as – well, first of all, instead of doing in-person meetings, anybody can set up a Zoom meeting. So, *[laughs]* I don't know how many Zoom meetings I've been on that, down in the chat box, somebody'll say, "I need to leave this meeting because I have another Zoom meeting." *[Laughs]* It's like, oh, my gosh. Deliver us from Zoom meetings.

But, you know, it's – it has just been insane.

*[1:28:00]*

This has been a crazy year, and I think it has been for everybody. I mean, it's – it's just been unbelievable. *[sighs]* … not just because of COVID but just because of the last four years has created a lot more work for us because – the claims are getting more outlandish, so we have to make sure that – like I said, I don't want to perpetuate, like, the pizza[gate conspiracy theory] thing in New Jersey or whatever that was. But just – it's harder to make revenue, too.

*[1:29:00]*

I mean, I – we haven't talked about the financial side of newspapers, but our advertising – when the governor did the shutdown, our advertising revenue that we – dropped overnight by 50 percent. And it has come back, but it's still not where it was a year ago. And so, you know, we're having to come up with new projects. We're having to come up with new things in the midst of – last Tuesday one of my employees was diagnosed with COVID. Her test came back positive. So we've lost an employee, and we already had a small staff, and everybody's – yeah, everybody's working much, much harder, and –

*[1:30:00]*

I think we'll all be very, very glad when, number one, 2020 is over with and they find a vaccine, not that anybody will wanna take it, because –

*Bradley Yendro:* That's another story. *[Laughs]*

*Linda Denning:* Yeah, that's a whole 'nother thing, but –

*Bradley Yendro:* Absolutely. So –

*Linda Denning:* Yeah. *[Laughs]*

*Bradley Yendro:* – speaking on that for next year and whatnot like that, what do you see as the future for media? How long do you think newspapers will be around?

*Linda Denning:* Mmm. You know, I have no idea.

I'm sure if I had the answer to that *[laughs]* I would have another revenue stream.

*[Crosstalk]*

*Linda Denning:* But I don't know. I have no idea how long. I do think, if we see the kind of, um –

*[1:31:00]*

business plan that we saw from some of the larger companies, it's not going to be long because, *[sighs]* it's just – it breaks my heart to see what's happened to papers like *the Salina Journal*. *Salina Journal* – the year that I got there, there was a young woman who worked for the – was a reporter [Karen Black] and she and our chief photographer had gone out to Goodland, Kansas. There used to be a sugar-beet industry in Sherman County, and they had really – you know, they did a lot of migrant workers.

*[1:32:00]*

And they had really substandard housing for them, and, anyway, she had gone out with the photographer and come back with a series of stories on the migrant workers. And the photographer, Fritz Mendell, had taken these phenomenal photos. And she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for that series. It was so good. So *the Journal* has gone from that when I started working there to – I don't even know if they've got a storefront yet. I heard they were looking for a storefront because they certainly didn't need that big building 'cause they didn't have a press**.**

[**Post-production addition:** The Journal has moved into an office at the former Salina Board of Trade building in another part of town.]

*[1:33:00]s*

They basically don't have a newsroom anymore. They maybe have a couple people in the newsroom, you know, everything has been farmed out to other newspapers in the chain, and – one of the things I think that illustrates is that we perhaps are responsible for a lot of our own problems. You just can't keep cutting, cutting, cutting and expect your readers to go along with it indefinitely. At some point they're gonna say, "This isn't worth what I'm paying for it," and they're gonna cancel their subscription.

*[1:34:00]*

And we've been hit with a lot of the – the industry's been hit with a lot of change, but in a lot of cases I don't think we've reacted well. So I'm saying that in hindsight, too, but I was saying that before, too, before –

*Bradley Yendro:* Awesome. We've been talking pretty general for the entire day kinda just around the world of journalism and everything like that. But, more specifically, what do you want your media outlet to be known for?

*Linda Denning:* I want it to be known for fairness and accuracy and an indispensable part of the community.

*Bradley Yendro:* How do you wanna be remembered?

*[1:35:00]*

*Linda Denning:* Oh, maybe back to what I said earlier, as someone who made maybe a little difference in her community, someone who at least tried to make the community a better place.

*Bradley Yendro:* Is there anything else you'd like to add to that? If not, that's all the questions that I have. You're all good. Okay. Then this is the conclusion of this oral history.

*[End of Audio]*

Appendix

[https://kspress.com/gaston-karl](about:blank)

**Gaston, Karl**



Karl K. Gaston was born July 6, 1929, in Corning, Kansas. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War and graduating from Kansas State University, Gaston began his newspaper career. He served as publisher the Sterling Bulletin, Holyrood Gazette, Bushton News, Rice County Monitor-Journal, Haven Journal, Mount Hope Clarion, Cawker City Ledger, Belleville Telescope and the Hebron (Neb.) Journal Register.

Gaston spent the last 33 years of his life as editor and publisher of the Ellsworth Reporter, The Wilson World and The Marquette Tribune.

He belonged to the First United Methodist Church in Ellsworth where he taught Sunday school. He was a former mayor and city councilman in Ellsworth, a past president of Kansas Press Association, and a past president of the South Central Kansas Economic Development Association.

Gaston and his wife, Dorothy, were killed Oct. 22, 1998, in a automobile accident in Greensboro, N.C.

[https://kspress.com/eblen-tom](about:blank)

Tom Eblen’s newspaper career, which has spanned some 51 years, is punctuated by a common theme: teaching others.

A graduate of the University of Missouri, he has worked for the Columbia Missourian, the Amarillo (Texas) Daily News, the Kansas City Star and the Fort Scott Tribune. He was a reporter, copy editor, assistant city editor, city editor and managing editor at the Star and editor and general manager at the Tribune.

Although he spent 18 years at daily newspapers between 1960 and 1978, Tom might say his greatest achievements have been in molding future journalists for jobs in the real world.

From 1979 to 1980, he served as a Gannett Foundation Professional-in-Residence Visiting Professor at the University of Kansas. He must have enjoyed that experience, because following his stint at the Fort Scott Tribune, he returned to KU to serve as general manager and news adviser for the student newspaper, the University Daily Kansan, from 1986 and 2001.

Journalists who learned our craft the right way are sprinkled throughout Kansas and across the nation.

Since retiring from KU in 2001, he has been a part-time news consultant for the Kansas Press Association.