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*Brenna Dillon:* This is Brenna Dillon. Today is Sept. 30, 2020. I'm interviewing Sharon Kessinger of the *Marysville Advocate* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists project. This is part one. 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. Hi, Sharon.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Hi.

*Brenna Dillon:* Thanks for joining us again today. How are you doing?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, good, good.

*Brenna Dillon:* Great. Okay. Well, we're so excited to get to know you a little bit better and start understanding your story. And so, with that, we will kind of jump into the beginning of it all and start with your childhood. So, first and foremost when and where were you born?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I was born in Winifred, Kansas, [in 1937].

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It's a small town in northeast Kansas.

*Brenna Dillon:* Great. Was this the same town that you grew up in as well?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes, yes, it is.

*Brenna Dillon:* Oh, great. Who were your parents and what did they do for a living?

*Sharon Kessinger:* My parents were Owen and Pearl [Johnson] Totten, and they were both from farm backgrounds, but they -- after they were married, they moved into Winifred, which was just a tiny little village near my dad's home farm, and they started a business, which included a hardware store, hauling a tank wagon of gas –

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to farmers in the area, a mechanic shop. And eventually my dad sold farm implements and tractors and that kind of thing.

*Brenna Dillon:* So, did they primarily move to that small town for the farming benefits?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes. Yes. Right. Right. There were probably only about 75 people in Winifred at that time. It had been bigger, but it had dwindled. And there were only – would you like to hear about how many businesses and what they were or –

*Brenna Dillon:* Sure, please.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Okay. Well, besides my dad's business, there was another gas station and a blacksmith shop, a post office in the grocery store –

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grain elevator, Union Pacific depot, and a beer hall, and that's about it.

*Brenna Dillon:* So not much there.

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, not much. We did have a school, which was just a frame building, and it was a one-room school, and we had a Baptist church.

*Brenna Dillon:* Wow. So, what -- what kind of influences did your parents have on your life and kind of growing up in that small town?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, they were -- they were just about my only influence, I mean technically, because, in Winifred, there weren't very many people that – I would say some teachers were influential, but –

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my mom and dad worked very hard, long hours. They started their business in 1929, which was the beginning of the bank crash and followed by the Great Depression, so they were -- they were working just nonstop, and we didn't go places much, and so my -- our extended family, who lived in the area mostly, would have been influential, and of course, we knew just about everyone in Marshall County, Kansas, because of when I was a little girl, I rode in the gas truck around, delivering gas to farmers –

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with my parents and then lots of people from the community came to the store. And so, I grew up in that environment. My mother gardened and cooked and was the the homemaker, but she also was a great part of the business and the bookkeeper for my dad's business. And as I grew up, I got to -- I was required to do a lot of that kind of work as well, and I worked in the store and -- selling screws and nuts and bolts and nails and lots of other things.

*Brenna Dillon:* So, would you say that most of your childhood, your life, was very influenced by the family –

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and very family focused?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes, that's true. That's true. Are you talking about just my elementary school years?

*Brenna Dillon:* Yes.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Uh-huh, okay. All right. I have one brother Larry, and I will -- I wanted to tell you that I was born in the back of the hardware store and -- *[laughs]* I love hardware stores to this day, especially old-fashioned ones. But my parents moved a house from -- that they bought from a farm into town and turned it into the store, and they lived in the back of it. So that's where I was born, and my brother.

*Brenna Dillon:* Wow, that's incredible. So it's just you, it was just you and your brother then?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes. Yes.

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*Brenna Dillon:* What, what does your brother do, or what did he do for a profession?

*Sharon Kessinger:* My brother is -- he's retired, but he was an accountant, a CPA, and a lawyer, and he spent all of his career living in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

*Brenna Dillon:* So, he kinda moved away from the small-town atmosphere, huh?

*Sharon Kessinger:* He did. When he graduated from K-State, his first job was in, with a big oil company in Tulsa, and so he went there, and then he didn't like working for the big company, and, you know, just having a cubicle by the window, so *[laughs]* he –

*Brenna Dillon:* *[Laughs]*

*Sharon Kessinger:* – got a job working for a company that manufactured heaters for oil drilling rigs, drilling rigs.

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And they sold those heaters worldwide. So he was their accountant, and he got his CPA soon after he graduated and then he went to Tulsa, University of Tulsa Law School.

*Brenna Dillon:* So, what, what was your relationship like with him growing up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* With my brother?

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm-hmm.

*Sharon Kessinger:* *[Laughs]* Well, I was two years younger than he was and I remember a lot of times just being furious with him, and I always said if I'd had a gun I would have killed him because he, you know, taunted me and that kind of thing. But, but in a way, we were close.

*Brenna Dillon:* Siblings always seem to have some kind of effect on us like that.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes.

*[0:09:00]*

Yes, right. And, uh –

*Brenna Dillon:* Is there anyone else in your family or extended family who worked in journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, no, not at all. The closest thing I think would have been my dad's youngest brother [Gale Totten], and he was a teenager when he came into Winifred to work for my dad and stayed with our family, and he eventually wrote a book about his life. He -- at that time, my grandmother [Etta Totten] is always credited with realizing that there wasn't going to be much opportunity for him in farming or in the area and she researched, I'm not sure how, but she found a school, a radio school in Kansas City –

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that he attended, and from that he became a radio man on airplanes. And during the war [World War II], he worked in the -- hauling rubber from Central and South America to plants in Europe and in the United States, of course. And, and then after that, he worked for TWA for years. And, at any rate, he had an interesting life and traveled far from Winifred and was kind of always my hero. But he -- and he did write a book, which was mostly, you know, for the family, but it was really interesting.

*Brenna Dillon:* So, you mentioned that he was your hero. Was he someone –

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that you looked up to as far as career aspirations or someone who inspired you or anything along those lines?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, and I guess just the fact that he was able to travel the world and I -- that was -- always sounded very exciting to me. I'm gonna jump ahead a little bit, along that line, though. When I met my husband, Howard, we met at K-State in old Kedzie Hall, the journalism school, and a friend introduced us, and he asked me if I'd like to go across the way to the union for coffee. And, and I said sure, and as we went out the door, it was a really, really foggy day in Manhattan, Kansas, and he looked out and said, "Oh, this reminds me of London."

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 *[Laughs]* And I've always told my daughters that that did it for me. I thought this is a man of the world. *[Laughs]* So anyway, that's –

*Brenna Dillon:* Wow. Um –

*Sharon Kessinger:* And but actually my career hasn't taken me very far, although we've traveled quite a bit.

*Brenna Dillon:* So other than your uncle was, who did all this writing, was journalism or entering into a profession of writing kind of taboo in your family especially if a lot of them were working in the farm industry?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, not really, and actually when I went to K-State, I had no idea what I wanted to do. And I went to my -- I was assigned an adviser, and he looked at my test scores and that kind of thing –

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and said, "Well, you seem to like English quite a bit and, and, writing. How would you like to try journalism?" And I said, "Yeah, that sounds good." And really that's kind of been the story of my life. I just kind of, I never really set goals, or I just drifted into things, I guess. But so, I majored in journalism. It was called technical journalism at K-State at that time. And I liked it. I just stayed with it.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm. And kind of along those same lines, how would you describe your family's expectations for you when you were growing up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, my mom had been a schoolteacher before –

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she -- in those days when you married, you had to quit teaching, but she was -- she just always expected us to do well in school, my brother and I. And it wasn't anything that she really demanded. It was just that we always knew it was expected. And she was really good at spelling, and she encouraged reading and that kind of thing. I would say that would have been the influence that was most important.

*Brenna Dillon:* And just to touch on a little bit here, what, what do you know, or can you talk about anything about your -- your husband's family and how they kind of influenced him into his career as well?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, he was an –

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an art major at Wichita State, but I think he went two years there and just decided that he wasn't, you know, really interested in staying in that, and so he went to the Army for a year and a half and that's how he ended up in London [at Chelveston AFB from 1952-54]. And he was stationed in England north of London for a year and a half. And so, when he came back, he decided to go to K-State and major in journalism. His brother, Ed Kessinger, had owned a weekly newspaper in Junction City and so he -- while he went to school, he lived in Junction City and commuted to K-State. And he got his degree in journalism in 1957 –

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 and I graduated in 1959. But he was -- he started out thinking he would be an ad man, and he was the advertising director for the *Collegian*, and I was, too, at a later date, and I was editor of the *Collegian* while I was there. But he, Howard, continued to work in Junction City with his brother for a couple of years, and that was back when, you know, we were letterpress newspapers. And so he did a lot of that work and that was when you worked on the night before the paper went to press. You worked all night and –

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getting it out, and so he remembered driving with a friend from Junction City, another veteran by the way, who – after getting no sleep and driving for an 8 a.m. class. But then after he graduated, he went to work as the advertising director at the *Reflector-Chronicle* in Abilene, and he worked there for -- I don't -- for several years or three or four years maybe, I think. And then a friend of ours had, from K-State journalism school, had gone to Oberlin in northwest Kansas for a job after school and she told Howard –

*[0:18:00]*

 that the publisher there was getting near retirement age and he was a legislator in Topeka and was probably going to be selling his paper. So I think Howard contacted him and went out for an interview, and they had a handshake agreement that Howard would come there, work on the paper, and if they liked each other … he would have the opportunity to buy the paper, and that's the way it turned out. We were married a couple of years after he went out there. I had gone -- I had worked at the *Abilene Reflector* after I got out of college, too, and so we got married then a couple of years later and –

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started our family, and that was about the time that we started buying the *Oberlin Herald.*

*Brenna Dillon:* Were Howard's parents involved in any writing or the journalism world at all?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes.

 [**Post-production addition:** Howard’s parents were not journalists. His brother, Ed, was publisher of the weekly *Junction City Republic*, and Howard worked for him while he went to K-State in 1955-57.].

*Brenna Dillon:* Do you know, uh –

*Sharon Kessinger:* And he [Howard], he did a lot of writing. He did – in Oberlin, you did just about everything, and so he sold all the ads and wrote a lot of the stories, and always wrote editorials and a column and did a lot of that. And in the earlier years of our marriage, I wasn't ever full time at the newspaper, but I did write columns and, and then after our children were older, I was working there. But not so much until –

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we moved to Marysville to take over the paper and I started working more there. Here.

*Brenna Dillon:* So we touched a bit about on your hometown and what it was kind of like to grow up there. What was the media environment like there while you were growing up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, while we were growing up, it was -- my parents always subscribed to the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, which I think, I believe it came -- I'm sure it came by mail, too, but we always got it timely, I think, I think the next day, probably the next morning. But they -- and then we subscribed to the *Marysville Advocate* and the *Frankfort Index* and, oh, from time to time, magazines and the radio.

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We listened to the radio quite a bit.

*Brenna Dillon:* And what kinda news would you typically be consuming through these different media outlets? Was it just kind of what was happening in the town or events going on? Um –

*Sharon Kessinger:* The *Advocate* was always a really good countywide newspaper and so they carried the news of the county, and of course, we got our state news and some national news from the Topeka paper and on the radio. But that's about the extent of the news that we got.

*Brenna Dillon:* Okay. How would you describe the general expectations for men and –

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for women in the place where you grew up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I'd say, in those years, that it was the man was the breadwinner and the head of the household and the woman was the homemaker and more responsible for the children, although it varied from family to family, I think. And, in my family, my mom was, you know, pretty much equal in the business, but she was more of an influence than my dad on child raising, you know, and that kind of thing and schoolwork and that sort of thing.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm.

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Were you, as a child, were you looking forward to fulfilling those expectations as a woman in the home, or were you kind of more eager to move outside of those expectations that were kind of placed on women, or did you feel a certain pressure to fulfill those expectations?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I guess I always felt that I could do just about anything and, and that I would, and I didn't feel constrained by those kind of roles that people played. But -- and I really don't remember in my career that – I suppose there was discrimination, but I wasn't too aware of it really.

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I guess I just -- I had a work ethic from my parents that told me that if you worked hard enough and were good enough at your job, you could do just about what you wanted to. And, and we were never really ambitious to make a lot of money or to be famous or anything like that, so the fact that women have always probably been paid less for the same work as men, but it didn't bother me. If you were doing what you liked to, what you loved to do and getting along, that was good.

*Brenna Dillon:* Great. And kind of jumping back a little bit here, when we were talking about media in your hometown, what was the general media environment like in the U.S. –

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in general when you were growing up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* You know, I don't know that I can really tell you that because I think I lived a pretty sheltered life, and I wasn't exposed to a lot of national media. We didn't have TV until I was in high school and so we used to – during World War II, my parents would -- the only evenings that they ever would do anything besides work they would go -- we would go to the movies in Marysville and there were -- they had films, you know, of what was going on in the war. And, and my parents, we went to –

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war movies and I always – and they gave me nightmares and I always wondered why my parents took me to them, but that was -- I never really asked. *[Laughs]* But, but I really can't tell you much about what the, you know, the national news was at that time or – I guess we became aware of it through the radio and through -- the *Marysville Advocate* had, of course, the momentous things like the end of World War II. They had a big story about that and, you know, that kind of stories, but not a lot of media.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm. And, and just to confirm again, Sharon, what year were you born in?

*Sharon Kessinger:* 1937.

*Brenna Dillon:* Okay. Great. Thank you.

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 So –

*Sharon Kessinger:* So, I didn't live through the Depression, but my parents did and, and I'm aware that they were influenced heavily by that.

*Brenna Dillon:* Yeah. Do you have any memories of them talking about the Great Depression, or how they were impacted by the Great Depression?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Not too much, but my dad, he had in -- he had gone to Winifred. There was not much opportunity on the farm for my dad. He had three brothers and, and it was a small farm, and so he went to Winifred and managed a lumberyard [Winifred Lumber] for a man who lived in Home City, which is near Marysville. And, but, um –

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he and Mom would go to Manhattan sometimes on weekends because my grandmother [Jenny Kirkwood] lived there. And one of those weekends, the lumberyard burned and so then Dad was out of a job really. And they didn't intend to rebuild the lumberyard, but Dad wanted to start a business there, so he went to talk to bankers in Marysville and Frankfort, and Frankfort was the nearest town with a bank. And they told him that he could have the loan if his father would sign the note with him. And he said, "Well, I can't ask my dad to sign a note," because, you know, it was –

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that Depression time, or hard times. And so, he went then and talked to the man in Home City who had owned the lumberyard and he loaned him the money, and so that's how he started his business in 1929. And, so then they didn't talk a lot about how hard it was or how -- I've talked to people who -- I talked to a man who owned a bakery in Oberlin who told me that he went to home from work one evening, and the next morning he went back to work and he had no bank account at all. It was all gone. And, uh –

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm.

*Sharon Kessinger:* – just people like that, that I've known who lived through the Depression.

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And, and, I do remember that I lived through the Dust Bowl days, and Mom always told me that my brother, who is two years older than I was, when he was just a baby she would have to put, oh, tea towels, dish towels over his crib to keep the dust from getting in his lungs when he was, you know, was just a tiny baby and, and the air was full of dust. A big cloud of dust would roll in and, and, yeah. There are stories about that kind of thing in, in my earlier years.

*Brenna Dillon:* Wow. That's, that's pretty incredible. The, the towels over the crib, that's an image –

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yeah.

*Brenna Dillon:* – that I don't think a lot of people will have in their memories.

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*Sharon Kessinger:* Right. Well, one of the women who worked for our -- worked for us at the *Oberlin Herald* said that in their household, when they did the dishes after breakfast, they would put the -- dry them and put them back on the table upside down. And when it was lunchtime, or they called it dinner then, the noon meal, they would turn the plates over and within -- before you got any food on that plate, it would be covered with dust.

*Brenna Dillon:* Wow.

*Sharon Kessinger:* So yeah.

*Brenna Dillon:* That's, that's crazy to think about. Kind of along the, the same lines, you were born kind of right on the cusp of Pearl Harbor, but do you remember anything from around that time or, again, like your, your parents talking about the Pearl Harbor bombing?

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*Sharon Kessinger:* I probably studied it in school or if it was – I don't know if – it wouldn't have been in the schoolbooks. That was 1936, was it?

*Brenna Dillon:* '36, mm-hmm. [The Pearl Harbor bombing was in 1941].

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes, and I was just born in '37 and, so during the war, that would [have] been the 1940s. I, you know, I knew about Pearl Harbor. But I don't remember. My dad didn't go to the war because his business, he was deferred or whatever the word is *[laughs]* because his business was considered essential to the war effort. And he sold tires and gas and just the whole keeping the farm economy going.

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So, he didn't go to the war. And, but I remember when people in our community would have sons going or husbands or fathers or – and there was -- there was always a lot of apprehension and sadness during those years. I remember rationing, that when you – my mom had to go and get stamps to buy sugar and flour and just basic food, food items, and of course, things like tires were rationed because of the shortage of rubber. And so, you had to save up your stamps to get tires and that kind of thing –

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if you had a car. And of course, nobody had more than one vehicle, I think.

*Brenna Dillon:* And was this during World War II?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes, that would have been World War II.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm. Did that – you mentioned having to ration tires and how your dad did a lot of work with that. Did that ever put pressure on your, your family financially, or do you remember having any kind of stress throughout the family because of that?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Not, not really. I think his business went well and, well, he just worked very, very hard. And I do remember that he was -- he often missed meals. We always had –

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very regular meals, morning, noon, and evening and, a lot of times, if he was working on an implement or something for a farmer he stayed, he just stayed at the shop and finished it. And he started out doing his own mechanic work and then he later was able to hire people to work. And his business grew pretty steadily, I think, and of course, the years after the war were fantastic years for business in this country, I think.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm-hmm.

*Sharon Kessinger:* And, but I don't remember, I don't remember being stressed – we never worried about food because my parents, mostly Mom, had a garden and –

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she canned food and later froze it. But we had homegrown – and then the farm where my dad grew up was just about five miles from Winifred so -- and my grandmother [Etta Totten] had a large orchard and a huge garden and lots of chickens and they had -- my uncle [Byron Totten] had pigs there -- which they butchered. And, you know, we pretty much lived off of the land when I was growing up.

*Brenna Dillon:* Mm. And kind of around the same time period, do you remember anything about the day that Franklin Roosevelt died?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes, I have, *[laughs]* I have a story about that. Just that I was -- I remember the day very well because I was –

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my mom was ironing in the – I was entertaining myself on the kitchen table with coloring or something and, and she had the -- she would run, have the radio on while she was ironing. And I wasn't paying any attention to the radio, but I realized that my mom had started to cry. And it was -- it was a momentous occasion if my mom ever cried. She just didn't cry much. And she told me that FDR had died. And I think it was -- that was a really stressful time in our nation's history because it was just as the war was ending, but I don't believe it was quite over yet, and it's hard to, you know, think that –

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 you've lost your leader at a time like that. And she went across this -- my dad's business was, the store was just across the road really and up a little ways from our house, so she went over to tell Dad. And that, *[laughs]* that really has always been a memory of mine. I think one of your questions maybe you had -- I remember the Kennedy -- the Kennedy assassination. Is that too far off field?

*Brenna Dillon:* Oh, no, please.

*Sharon Kessinger:* By that time, we were married and living in Oberlin and … our oldest daughter was, oh, I was just pregnant. She was born four days after he was killed. But on that day, I was at home and I was scraping old wax off of a floor that we were going to refinish.

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And I had the -- there again, I hadn't realized till I started thinking about this how much the radio had been a part of my life, but I had the radio on and heard that JFK had been shot. And I called Howard to tell him. He was at the *Advocate*, and I don't think they ran the radio down there much. I mean he was at the *Herald*, not the *Advocate*. But he, at any rate, we both thought he'll be all right. We just didn't believe that he would die. And then, of course, hours later, they told us on the news that he had died. So that's pretty much burned in my memory where I was on that day as well. And I also remember the day that Nixon resigned

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because that, by that time, we were -- that was right before we left Oberlin to come to Marysville to live and, and, run the paper. And my daughters and I were at the county fair, and I was just walking down the midway and somebody I met walking said, "Hey, did you hear Nixon resigned?" And you know it wasn't really surprising. By that time, we had TV and, and we had been following all of the Watergate and all of that, so it wasn't real surprising. And it was, seemed like a good thing. *[Laughs]*

*Brenna Dillon:* *[Laughs]*

*Sharon Kessinger:* So.

*Brenna Dillon:* Was it -- was it interesting to receive some of that news through the TV versus the radio?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I don't remember, um –

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that, you know, the transition particularly. I mean I still, to this day, I listen to the radio a lot. I listen to NPR all the time when I'm able or in the car or wherever. And I don't know that I remember the transition or when the TV became part of it.

*Brenna Dillon:* Are there any other events or memories that you had during your childhood that you would like to include in this?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I, oh, I forgot to tell – there was one story. You want another story?

*Brenna Dillon:* Sure, please.

*[0:42:00]*

*Sharon Kessinger:* *[Laughs]* Okay. I had told you about my uncle, who was a radio man, but he was -- when he was working in Winifred, he's the one who told me -- told this story, and he wrote it in his book, too, but it was interesting. When there were a lot of German families in our – there are to this day in our county a lot of German families -- but several families who had immigrated to the United States from Germany had settled around Winifred. And my dad had a radio in his -- in the store, and people didn't in general have radios, I guess, and so there were several of those people –

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from Germany who asked, came and asked him if they could come in maybe on an evening and listen to his radio, to listen to a broadcast they wanted to hear from Germany. And so he said yeah and he – but my uncle who was working for him was -- he would have him go over and open the store in the evening and stay while they were there and then lock up the store. And he said that what they were listening to was Adolf Hitler, and that was when he was on his rise to power. And I don't know really – I wish that I – he's dead now, my uncle -- but I wish that I had asked him more about that, if he felt that they were being influenced in their thinking by these broadcasts –

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or if they were horrified or, you know, just what it was like to hear those broadcasts. But anyway, that's just another little, *[laughs]* little story I remember.

*Brenna Dillon:* Yeah, thank you for sharing. That's so fascinating. Yeah, I wonder, too, what it, what it would have been like to hear that, and what his reaction was like as well.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Right.

*Brenna Dillon:* Uh –

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yeah, and I have thought since we live here, I don't know if I could find any people who remember that. There are lots of -- I mean plenty of people of German descent here, but anyway.

*Brenna Dillon:* Um –

*Sharon Kessinger:* That would be interesting.

*Brenna Dillon:* Yes, definitely. Kind of going back to the memories just for a little bit, did, did your husband ever share any memories with you or, um specific –

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events that he remembered, or how they were covered in the press?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I'm sorry, how they were what?

*Brenna Dillon:* Covered in the press.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, I don't really know that he did. I don't recall anything.

*Brenna Dillon:* Okay. That's all right.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Mm-hmm.

*Brenna Dillon:* And then, kind of jumping back again, kind of talking more about your inspirations and we kinda talked a little bit about how you were inspired by your uncle, but did you always want to be a journalist or did you have kind of another ideal career that you wanted to be when you were growing up?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, no. I've always thought about that and thought, “I wonder” –

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I just sort of drifted into whatever I did, and I've now in later -- not just while I'm old but even earlier years, I often thought, oh, wow. I wish I would have majored in etymology, the science of words, I think that is -- or in, horticulture, which I love gardening, specifically flower gardening and landscaping. And there are just so many fields that sound so interesting. And, but I'm not sorry that I was a journalist and that I went -- that I drifted that way. But the world – one thing about journalism, I think that I -- that really –

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attracted me was the fact that at K-State, at that time anyway, had just a very core of journalism courses that you took, which were fascinating, but then you were encouraged to get a very liberal arts education so that you would know a lot about what was going on in the world and be able to write about it and tell those stories. But and –

*Brenna Dillon:* And lastly – we'll just end here, but are there any kind of last key components or important things that you want to include about your childhood and how that kind of shaped you into becoming who you are today?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Um –

*[0:48:00]*

Well, if it would be anything it would be the work ethic and, and, being an optimist about what you can do and where it can take you. And I like the fact that journalists are always or mostly the ones that I know, I've known, have been, you know, had such broad interests. There are just so many things that you can write about and places you can go and not so much influencing people, but well, not writing – I'm not, I've never been into writing to influence people, but I think the whole context of –

*[0:49:00]*

informing people and keeping them aware of what's going on in their community or in their state or their world does influence people tremendously. And, and it's so important to keep that out there for people. I'm really apprehensive about the future of, you know, community newspapers because that's what I've always been involved with. And people tell me that when radio first came in and then TV that there were always times when the prediction was that the newspaper would die, and it didn't happen. But, you know, in today's world –

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with the internet and, and that kind of thing, it just may happen. And it'll be -- it'll make a real change in small communities like I've always lived in, and I see the sense of community that you have in a smaller community, smaller town, and in cities … to some degree even, maybe not huge cities, but more moderate-sized cities. And I think it's gonna be sad if we really do lose the printed word and, and the coverage that is dependable. Because –

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what seems to be replacing the newspaper or the written journalism is just such a glut of misinformation and not only just from people who make mistakes but from people who – and don't correct them – but from people who intentionally don't tell the truth and don't believe the truth actually. So, yeah, it's, I guess that's my take on it. I think it's going to be sad if we do lose newspapers or something to replace them that is better than just something where your news is vetted and, and, you can rely on it to be true.

*[0:52:00]*

*Brenna Dillon:* Yes, definitely. Well, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing all of that with us. This will conclude part one.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Kate Robinson:* This is Kate Robinson. Today is Oct. 3, 2020, and I am interviewing Sharon Kessinger of the *Marysville Advocate* for Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists project. This is part two. The interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association. Okay, so how much formal education did you have?

*Sharon Kessinger:* A bachelor's degree in journalism from K-State.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. And, why did you choose that major?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Because I chose journalism because when I went to K-State I had -- didn't have any idea what I really wanted to major in, but I did like reading and writing and literature –

*[0:01:00]*

and, and the arts. And it seemed like journalism, the major was -- offered a lot of opportunities for kind of a liberal arts education, not so many technical courses. And it just seemed like a fit and so I -- my adviser suggested that I try it and I said, "Sure." And I guess I just sort of drifted into it then. I liked it, and I enjoyed the *Collegian* and, and the classes and, as well as a lot of different classes I liked. There were a lot of things I thought –

*[0:02:00]*

I would love to major in, and I still today think that I would have loved majoring in landscape architecture, garden, gardening, *[laughs]* English, literature, politics, studying languages and the origin of words. So, but journalism kind of offers you an all -- a pretty rounded education, I think, so that's why I chose that.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. You and Howard were both K-State Journalism School alumni. Is that where you met?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes. Yes, we did. We met in Kedzie Hall when I was a freshman and he was … he had gone to Wichita State and majored in art for a couple of years, and then he went to the Army for a couple of years and went to England –

*[0:03:00]*

for a year and a half and came back and decided he would transfer to K-State. I think probably influenced quite a bit by the fact that his brother, Ed, had owned and operated and edited a weekly newspaper in Junction City, and he offered Howard a job so that he could – and so he lived in Junction City and drove over to K-State for classes.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. How much influence would you say you and Howard's education had on your career path?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, I think our journalism education was a big influence in the work that we did and –

*[0:04:00]*

we were both advertising directors of the *Collegian* while we were there, and I was an editor of the *Collegian* one semester. And we enjoyed the newsroom and the classes. History of journalism was always a favorite. And we developed a lot of friendships there, too, that kind of kept us interested in journalism. It -- we knew it wasn't gonna make us rich, but it was something that we both really liked so that's kind of what got us into it. And then Howard was on the board of the Alumni Association and the K-State Foundation.

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And we went there a lot for meetings, and we were even asked to sometimes to come back and speak to a class at Kedzie and there were just lots of connections still with K-State after we graduated. And, and it was a useful source for what was going on in the journalism world that, you know, as we progressed through our careers. So, yeah, that was –

*Kate Robinson:* Great, okay. Did you work anywhere else before entering the media industry?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, my work started in my father's hardware store [Winifred Hardware & Gas] in Winifred where I grew up. He had –

*[0:06:00]*

a hardware and a service, a gas station we called it then. So, I was pretty proud of being a pump jockey in those days at the gas pumps. And that was my first job when I was just a teenager, and I worked all through college. I worked in the print shop at the *Collegian*, or at Kedzie Hall, and spent a couple of years operating the -- I cannot remember what we called it, but it was a really new invention then I think. It was a drum scanner, and it involved just actually scanning pictures *[laughs]* for hours on end. And it wasn't too exciting, but it was –

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it was a job, which I needed. And it was -- it offered some time to do some homework and some reading as well. And then, I guess those were the only jobs that I had. When I graduated, I went right into working, or shortly after I graduated, working for a newspaper. And after we married and moved to Oberlin, I worked for a while in an insurance office. We had not bought the paper at that time. Howard had been hired to come there as the -- to manage the paper and edit it, so I – and then we started our family and the insurance office wasn't my –

*[0:08:00]*
best day. And the owner one time asked me why I wasn't working at the newspaper, and Howard and I had made a pact when we were married that we were never -- we would never work in the same office. But then when you go to a small community and you're the only other person in town with a journalism degree, it seems pretty ridiculous for you not to be working there. So anyway, we worked it out and we worked together ever after that [for 45 years total]. And it was, you know, it was good.

*Kate Robinson:* So, when and why did you decide to become a journalist or enter the media field?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, probably not until I was already in journalism at K-State. I really had no –

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I never, when I was a child, I never had an idea of what I wanted to be when I grew up. There were just too many things to choose from and that I would have loved to do. And so when I went to K-State, I had no idea what I would major in or what kind of a career I would have, and so I've always thought I really am kind of a drifter. I just drifted, drifted into it. After I got into it, I liked it a lot and stayed with it.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. Did you have any doubts or concerns about pursuing this career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, not really. It's always been good and there's always something new every day. And you get to know a lot of people and see a lot of things, so it –

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it was -- it was a good, good fit for me, I think.

*Kate Robinson:* Good. How did your family and friends react to your decision to become a journalist?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I don't remember anybody, uh – course by that time, a lot of my friends were in journalism, and my family, my mom was always supportive of just about everything I did. I can remember going home on Christmas vacation from K-State one year and my parents always helped me financially while I was in college, too. But going home for Christmas break and telling my father about a great book that I had been reading in a class, in a literature class at K-State, and his response was, "I thought you were down there for more than just reading storybooks." *[Laughs]* He had no –

*[0:11:00]*

appreciation for that kind of thing, I guess.

*Kate Robinson:* Mm.

*Sharon Kessinger:* But he was supportive.

*Kate Robinson:* So, we had talked about this a little bit before. So when you entered the journalism industry, were you single or married at the time?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Single.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yeah.

*Kate Robinson:* And then when did you marry Howard?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, after, when I graduated – he graduated in 1957 and I graduated in 1959, and when I graduated, we had been friends for a long time and dated sporadically. But, at any rate, I wasn't looking to get married or anything, *[laughs]* and I was looking for a job. And, so I – and I found one at, working for –

*[0:12:00]*

Clyde Reed, who was the publisher at Parsons, Kansas, and he had bought a paper [the *Pryor Creek Daily Times*]at Pryor Creek, Oklahoma. And so, he hired me and sent me down there to be the news editor right out of college and I was really green. Didn't know much about what I was doing, but it worked and I got along okay, but Howard was working as the ad director at the *Reflector-Chronicle* in Abilene at that time and so one time I had stopped through there and we had coffee when I was -- I think I had gone to Salina for a job interview. And so he introduced me to Henry Jameson [See Appendix], who was the publisher of the paper and, and we got along. And so, after I had been working in Oklahoma for a couple of years –

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he -- Henry called and asked me if I would come to Abilene to be the news editor. His news editor was leaving and, and, he wanted me to come. So, and offered me more money than I was making, so I thought, well, I better, it's closer to home. And I went to work as news editor of the *Reflector-Chronicle* for a couple of years. And meantime, Howard left and went to Oberlin in western Kansas and -- with the idea of buying a community paper himself. He had aimed at being a news -- an advertising person … but while he was in Abilene, he went back to New York City to –

*[0:14:00]*

visit a friend who was in an -- working for an ad agency. And he came back and said he didn't think he wanted to do that. His friend just -- his life consisted of a cubicle next to a window and, you know, aspiring to the best cubicle by the best window. And he became more interested all the time in the news side of the paper as well as advertising. So, he went out to Oberlin to -- because the paper was coming up for sale there. And he made a handshake agreement with Ernest Woodward [See Appendix], who was the owner, that if he liked it and they liked him, he would have the opportunity to buy the paper. So he was in Oberlin doing that and he came –

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Well, while I was working in Abilene, we were dating some and *[laughs]* but anyway, he came back to Abilene for a Mardi Gras dance that our church had sponsored every year there. And, after he went back home that, after that weekend, he called me on Monday and *[laughs]* asked me to marry him and – on the phone. And, so, actually, I was not sure that I was ready to get married and I said, "Well, let me think about it." And so, the next day, he asked his friend who was an amateur pilot out there to fly him down to Abilene to *[laughs]* ask me to marry him in person, which he did. And, and, I said yes, so then we were married in 1962 –

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and I moved to Oberlin. And I think it was maybe a year later or two years later that we started buying the paper and, and we started having children. We have three daughters who were born in Oberlin and our son Michael was born later when we lived in Marysville.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. Could you tell me your children's, names, their first and last names?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Okay. My oldest daughter is Hannah Malotte, M-A-L-O-T-T-E, and she teaches music and Spanish at the Catholic church, Catholic school here. And my second daughter is Sarah, who owns – Sarah Kessinger – who owns the paper now and is the editor-publisher.

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And then Mary, our third daughter, is the PE teacher and tennis coach at the high school here. And they're all married and have children. And Mike lives in Hays and he was a sports writer and he -- and then when the *Hays Daily*, it was part of the Harris chain and that whole chain was bought out by -- is it GateHouse, I believe, the big, big corporation, from back East or from someplace else. Anyway, their MO just cutting, slashing the news side to the bone and –

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so he lost -- he went to work as – he worked for about six months as just a regular reporter reporting government, and then they cut some more, and he lost that job. So, he is now working as -- in maintenance at the schools in Hays.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. And how many grandchildren do you have?

*Sharon Kessinger:* We have -- we have – *[laughs]* wait a minute – seven grandchildren and, yeah, yeah, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren now. But Howard died in 19-, or 2015.

*Kate Robinson:* Okay. Well, this concludes the part, the end of part two.

*[End of Audio]*

*[0:00:00]*

*Maddie Hall:* This is Maddie Hall. Today is Oct. 6, 2020. I am interviewing Sharon Kessinger of the *Maryville's Advocate* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalist project. This is Part 3. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association.

We'll start by talking about your career path and work experiences. So, what and where was your first journalism job?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I guess my first journalism job was during college when I was working for the *Collegian* and the – I was the editor of the *Collegian*, and then the advertising manager and then during the summer between my junior and senior year at K-State, I worked for the *Marysville Advocate* just for the summer.

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*Maddie Hall:* And what year was that?

*Sharon Kessinger:* 1955, or no, wait a minute, sorry, that would have been 1958.

*Maddie Hall:* And how did you get your first journalism job at K-State?

*Sharon Kessinger:* You know, I really don't remember. I think just applied at the *Advocate* and, I was home for the summer and was hired. And the -- Byron and Eulalia Guise owned the *Advocate* then and Byron was having surgery that summer so Eulalia needed another person and so I was the one and I didn't fill their shoes, but I did learn a lot and I –.

*[0:02:00]*

 Byron took all the photos for the *Advocate* pretty much and so I got to learn a lot about, about that.

*Maddie Hall:* And so what was the media environment like at the time, when you first got into journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* You mean in the newsroom or in the –?

*Maddie Hall:* Yeah, yes, in the newsroom.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Uh-huh.

*Maddie Hall:* What was the environment?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it was -- there was always a lot of pressure, you know, on the days before we went to press. I've always worked for – well, not always, but most of my career has been working on weekly newspapers and the first three days of the week were always the tough ones and then we kinda relaxed on the last two days.

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 But there were always – women were common in the newsroom in smaller newspapers in those days. On the *Collegian*, you know, we were students and it was mostly men and women working. And I've always found that, wherever I was, the feeling in the newsroom was one of being kind of a family and you got to know everyone, and people were generally pretty nice to work with.

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*Maddie Hall:* What was the journalism technology like at this time in the late '50s?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Okay. It was -- mostly it was all letterpress printing and we wrote our stories on typewriters and handed them off to someone who would be setting them on a linotype or, yeah, on linotype. And headlines were handset back in those days with what we called the stick, and I didn't have too much experience with that kinda thing, but in a class at K-State we did learn to set headline or type in a stick and that was just letter by letter of metal type, putting it in.

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*Maddie Hall:* What was it like to be a journalist during this time period, at the beginning of your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* It was interesting, it was fun, and I enjoyed it. I didn't ever experience any hard news sources at that time because, you know, I was, what I did was not covering government or anything very sensitive. I did do obituaries, and I learned a lot about that, and I became really respectful of good obituary writers because, you know, that's kind of the final story of someone's life and it's really important to people and it's important to history. So I enjoyed it.

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*Maddie Hall:* Can you expand a little bit on your experience writing obituaries and how that compares to your other – the other stories you've done throughout your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* We really didn't have to usually go out and look for the information because it was usually supplied by the family or the funeral home, and, but it was important to get things right. One of my worst experiences was when I first worked -- after I was out of college, my first job was at the *Pryor Creek Daily Times* in Oklahoma, and Clyde Reed from Parsons, Kansas, had purchased the newspaper there and he sent – he hired me to be the news editor.

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 And so I – and I was really green, I didn't really know much about how this worked. And one of the things I did when we were on the press at the paper, and someone called in from a neighboring town and wanted to get an obituary in the paper and I said no, we were on the press and we couldn't do it. And, so one of the other staff members there told Clyde about it and – because apparently it was – this person was really upset. And he came – when he came down – he usually came down once a week to kind of give us some directions and guidance. And he really was very angry at me –

*[0:08:00]*

 for having turned that down and he said, “You know, your obituaries are one of the most important things you do, and you get 'em in the paper that week.” You know, we were – no, it was a daily, but you get it in the paper because it needs to be there timely. So that was a lesson I never forgot.

*Maddie Hall:* Could you explain a little bit more about your other memories of working as editor at the *Pryor Creek Daily Times*?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, yes, I – one thing that was a revelation to me was I was the news editor and Ray Denner was the manager of the paper and --which mostly meant he was the advertising person and he really didn't do anything on the news side. But we usually went for coffee at –.

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 Our back door was next to the back door of the drugstore, which had a soda fountain counter, and we went over there for coffee. And one day we went over and so we were sitting at the counter on these stools and a man came in and walked up to us and just hit Ray and knocked him off the stool and it was really pretty – I mean I had never been around violence at all and there it was. And it was because we had had a -- just a – it wasn't a big story or anything, but it was just a listing, really, of his son being in trouble and it was in the court news or the police report, I don't remember which.

And, anyway, he left, the man left and –

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 the druggist helped me help pick up Ray, and he wasn't really hurt badly, but it was pretty, pretty much of a shock to me that anybody would be that angry at the newspaper.

And, let's see, aside from that –.

*Maddie Hall:* Do you remember what year that was in?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yep, that was 1960, no, yeah, about – well, 1959, sorry.

*Maddie Hall:* How many women were in the newsroom at the *Pryor Creek Daily Times* and what was it like being a woman journalist at this time?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Actually, I think there weren't any men writers.

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 There were two other women besides me and that was the news staff, and we used a lot of, you know, handouts. We didn't have a — what did you call it, teletype or – we didn't get national news, but we did get state news and that kind of thing. And so there really wasn't much … it would have been common for the person who was the manager, which it would – to be male, I think. I didn't give it a lot of thought at the time, but that's the way it was there.

*Maddie Hall:* How did your first journalism job affect your career in the long term or affect your understanding of journalism as a whole?

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*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it seems to me that that was something that I just kind of learned through the years and it was always changing. And I didn't really have responsibilities, you know, for the whole paper while I was there. I was the news editor and so I had -- I was responsible for the writing and the editing and that kind of thing. But we pretty much handed it off to someone in the shop who put it together and we didn't -- we didn't use much editorial judgment at that paper on, you know, what was –

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 I mean we would say – I mean give the person who was gonna put it together an idea of the main stories and that kind of thing, but – And Clyde Reed, who was the owner, wrote the editorials and sent them down. So, I am not sure that I learned – I mean I just learned the day to day how you do it, but I didn't make any big discoveries there.

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

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it would have been Clyde Reed, and he wasn't someone who was – he was a good role model, I guess, because he – you know, his family had been journalists [See Appendix] –

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 in Kansas and he had owned and published papers there. So I learned quite a bit from him about what would be the most important story that would be in the paper that week and, you know, where we were going with it.

*Maddie Hall:* So, since or after your first journalism job or jobs, what other journalism jobs have you had, and can you explain what you did at each of them?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yes. After … just a couple of years in Oklahoma, and then I was hired to be the news editor at the *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, and so I moved back to Kansas and I worked there, and it was a bigger – a little bit bigger paper than – and more established.

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 It had been there a long time, and Henry Jameson was the publisher and the editor. And he wrote the editorials and did that and managed the paper, but in the newsroom there, we had – there was one other news writer and a sports writer and they were both male. And then there were three other women in the office, I believe. One who did proofreading and did the obituaries, and then a – one probably who did the most work was the social editor, and, and then the other one was a news writer. [Phil Berkebile was a news and sports reporter.]

 And so I stayed there for two years and then I –

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 got married and moved to Oberlin in western Kansas, and my husband and I were planning to buy the paper there. He had been – maybe I told you in this last interview that he had started out his career in thinking he would be an advertising person and changed his mind, decided he'd rather be more – be involved in the news and editorial side. So, that was what prompted him to move to Oberlin, and he had a chance to buy the paper there, and so then we were married after that.

And we started out just – he worked at the paper and I didn't – I was –

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 we had a kind of little pact between us that we would never work on the same newspaper, but when you go to a small town and you're the only two people in town with a journalism degrees, it was pretty foolish, so I started working there but just as a writer and that was probably pretty much it. But I was – we started having children and I wasn't working full time at first. And, so –.

And then after we were there, I believe Howard had been there four years when I – and when we got the chance to buy the paper. So, from then on, we were in debt and we were raising a family and running a newspaper –

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 and being part of the community, which was a big part of running the newspaper.

So we were in Oberlin for 12 years, and then we had a chance to buy the *Advocate*, which was a bigger newspaper than the one in Oberlin. It was a bigger town. And, and it was my home area. I didn't grow up in Marysville, but in a little – I grew up in a little town nearby. And so we moved to Marysville and both worked on the paper. I didn't work so much earlier on. Our son was born after we moved here. We had three girls who were born in Oberlin.

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 And so I wasn't working full time at first. And then, then later, I started working full time.

*Maddie Hall:* Why did you and Howard sell the *Oberlin Herald*?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Just because of the opportunity to move here and we needed the – we were able to sell it to put the, you know, start paying for the *Advocate*, and, so financially it was a long ways to own – you know, for us to own two newspapers, so we sold the *Herald*.

*Maddie Hall:* Would you say that becoming a co-publisher of the *Advocate* with your husband in 1975 was pretty unheard of –

*[0:20:00]*

 for a female journalist in Kansas at the time? If not, why or why not, I guess?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, I don't think so. I think we got to know a lot of other newspaper owners through the Kansas Press Association and just working together with other newspapers in our area, and I think it was pretty common for couples to both – you know, to own a newspaper. And often they – maybe the wife didn't have the – a journalism degree, but a lot of them worked at their paper if they owned it.

*Maddie Hall:* Would you and Howard have ever pictured yourselves owning a newspaper for as long as you did?

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*Sharon Kessinger:* Yeah, I suppose we did. We liked it and it was our life, you know. It was – after we moved to Marysville, we -- and our children grew up here -- and we were pretty much a part of the community and so I don't think we ever really thought much about doing anything else. We bought the *Washington County News* when our friends from -- Tom, it was Tom and Christine Buchanan, and Tom died and – well, I think we bought the paper before Tom died, but he had a serious heart attack and surgeries and needed to –

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 get out of the paper and so we bought that paper.

And a young woman who worked for us here at the *Advocate* went over there to – she was part owner of the paper, too, she bought it with us, and she went over there to work and to be the editor and publisher there. And, but then – and I can't really remember how many years she was there, but when she met and married her husband there and decided she wanted to start raising a family and to be more active in their – he owned a -- he was a farmer and rancher and a veterinarian. But I don't believe he practiced there at the time. But he –

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 he was – she decided to be part of that operation, so she wanted out of the newspaper. So we – Howard, my husband, well, we did hire someone to be the editor there for a few years, but then when that person moved on and we didn't have anyone, then Howard started going over there and – which was kind of a big step in my career because I had to take over a lot of the duties that Howard had done here at the *Advocate*.

So those were the kind of hard years, and Howard just – Washington is only 22 miles away, so he just drove back and forth to be the editor there. But he didn't really work in our office much anymore. He did write editorials and he would come in to do that or to send over his editorials.

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 But I don't know, do you – I didn't -- I guess we did talk about the technology. Shortly before we left Oberlin, we had converted the paper from letterpress to offset printing, and we had – both papers had their own printing shops back in those days. And then when we moved here, the Guises had already converted to offset printing. And we were still, though, writing on typewriters and handing our paper off to someone who would set the -- set our stories. We had more employees who set and, you know, put together the ads and that sort of thing.

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 I guess we were the – we brought the computer, the first computer into the *Advocate* and it was a huge box in the middle of the -- what we called the back shop there. And then – and it was a very primitive kind of computer, I think. And for quite a while, we had a person who sat at it. It was not a typesetting machine but a machine where she typed in the stories and they were put on a – when she finished a story, she would push a button and it would come out as a tape that had been punched with all of that, and then that tape had to be taken back to the big computer and run through that in order to be printed out on pages, which, um –

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 then the pages were pasted up. And, if – I just remember what a nightmare it was to make corrections because we had to cut the little strips of type and paste them on top. It was really pretty work intensive back in those days, but –.

*Maddie Hall:* *[Interference]* the new technology added to the efficiency of the paper over time?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh yes, yes, definitely. Back in the early days of – well, when we were first here or even when I worked that summer, I remember that I think the paper had to be at the -- at the post office by 8 in the morning or something, so it wasn't unusual for –

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 the people – the printers and the publisher, usually, to work pretty much all night to get the paper out. It was pretty difficult. But – and, when we were in – still in Oberlin, a young couple with some children bought a paper in Jennings, Kansas, which was a smaller town even than Oberlin, and they were putting that paper out. And I remember how I would feel so sorry for them because they didn't have any help, they were doing it all themselves and they were up, you know, more than one night all night long just getting it produced. And it was very difficult back then, especially if you couldn't hire very many people.

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 But we were fortunate to have – both places, both newspapers that we purchased had really good staffs and people who had been there for a long time and knew what they were doing. And –.

*Maddie Hall:* What was the proudest moment of your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* We were always proud of informing our communities so that they – we would have citizens who were informed or educated about what was – you know, kept up on what was going on in the community. And you can really see democracy working if you go to cover the county commissioners, for instance, and I now remember this.

And one of – there was one county commissioner while I was covering it for a while –

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 who always – when an issue would come up, he would say, “Well, I think we should -- we should” – what did he say, “sit on this for a while or think about it,” and – which meant they didn't make a decision, but a week later they usually did. And by that time, they had had a lot of feedback from people who had read the story in the paper and had an opinion. And so they were a lot more in tune with what the community thought than in a place where they didn't have that advantage of having a community newspaper that covered what was going on.

So I think just being –

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 and being part of a community, and I was – when we worked on things like – we were involved in downtown redevelopment projects in both of Oberlin and Marysville, and just seeing the result of projects like that and how – what a part that citizens can play and what a part the newspaper can play in getting things like that done, I was always proud of that.

And, and then it was when – you get a lot of feedback on smaller newspapers because you might cover a meeting on Monday night and then have coffee with the mayor the next day or someone, you know, who was making those decisions.

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 And it was just good to know that you could be part of improving a community.

*Maddie Hall:* What were the most difficult moments of your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, the – I guess the most difficult time was when I was, um – Howard was – Howard had Huntington's Disease, which is a genetic disease, and it doesn't – in his family, it didn't show up until he was in his 70s but it – you kind of lose –

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 not only control of your body but of your ability to think things through. And, that was – those were hard years

as far as – there were always deaths in your community that are difficult, and I remember we had – we have an industry here in Marysville, Landoll Corporation, and Tom Joyce was one of the key figures in that industry. It was a homegrown industry and he had been, you know, an adviser and a consultant there for years. And he had just retired and he, uh –

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 had gotten very interested in economic development and was scheduled to become the economic development director for the county, which we really needed someone who knew the – how to do it.

And Tom had traveled – Landoll sells implements and other things to countries all over the world, and Tom had traveled a lot with that and he just had a lot of experience outside of our community and inside. And, just, he was the person who was going to take over that job, and we were just elated that he would do that. And then he died. He had surgery and – he wasn't, I don't remember how old he was, but he wasn't terribly old and it was just a shock.

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 And it was, I always – I have thought many times since then how things might have been different in our town and, you know, in terms of community development – economic development and that kind of thing if he had lived because it's not always hard – or easy -- to find someone with a lot of experience to come to a small town and do that kind of work. So, just things like that that affected our whole community.

*Maddie Hall:* Did you write obituaries for the *Advocate*, like you had for previous newspapers?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Not usually. Only when the obituary person is gone or something. That is one thing about the small newspaper is that –

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 you learn to do just about everything that there is to do and – because you don't have staff to always to fill in when someone's gone, who is ill or –.

One of the hardest times we had was when we came to the Oberlin -- our ad director and our pressman and our makeup person [Calvin Hadorn, Ernest Lange, and Ed Camel] had worked for the *Advocate* since they were very young and so they all three retired the same year and, after working there, I don't remember, it was over 100 years, I think, between them all. And we – you know, we just hadn't realized how much we depended on those people to make sure the doors were locked at night and –

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 just simple things as well as the big things. And that was a hard time just getting people to replace them.

*Maddie Hall:* What colleague or editor had the biggest influence on you?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I'll have to say it was Howard, my husband. We – he was a lot different than I was. He was never fearful or afraid to speak his mind, and he wrote – he had a strong editorial policy on, you know, issues that really affected a lot of people like capital punishment and gun control was one of his big ones. And –.

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 And just admired – we used to – I was in the newsroom and, here in Marysville, he had an office of his own that was right next to the newsroom. But people would sometimes come in and just be very, very angry at Howard for something he had written, and he – Howard never, ever went out the back door or anything like that. He thought people – the big thing that people want is to be heard and to be able to tell you what they think. And he was very easy – he listened to people and respected them.

And, one time, a man came in and someone, uh – oh, I guess it was our sports writer had just come into the newsroom and he said to us, “That guy's carrying a gun.”

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 And so we were all sitting out there in the newsroom just, you know, wondering whether we should call the law enforcement or what to do. But Howard just talked to this guy and, when they came out, it was just kind of – and this was pretty normal for when people had come to talk to Howard, they came out and they shook hands and the guy left. And, I think, you know, he just -- he was – he always liked to listen to other people's opinions and he didn't take them lightly, but he -- he was able to make the other person feel better about his point of view, at least.

Other people on the staff who had been here a long time were –

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 of course, good sources and, and good role models. And other people we knew through the Kansas Press and, you know, through other newspapers and friendships we had made were probably – and other people in the community were great role models.

*Maddie Hall:* What are your memories of attending NDNA conventions?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I am sorry, but we didn't – I only remember, KPA conventions, Kansas Press Association.

*Maddie Hall:* Could you elaborate on your experience – I'm sorry about that, about your KPA convention experiences?

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*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, yes, we enjoyed it and that's where we got to know a lot of other newspaper people. And Howard's nephew had worked for his father in the newspaper in Junction City and that's where Howard got his start in the newspaper. And so his nephew, Curt Kessinger, had bought a newspaper in Kansas, a small newspaper, and then he was on the KPA, at the KPA conventions and I think he was on the KPA board. And he had a great sense of humor and he was always one of the people who made up the blooper breakfasts and some of the really fun events.

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 So we always had a good time at the KPA conventions, as well as learning a lot because they – through the years they had a lot of good workshops and we were pretty diligent about attending those things. We didn't – I think some – we always thought some newspapers, which weren't such good newspapers, didn't – they just went for the social part of it. But we enjoyed the – but we liked the workshops.

And Howard was – he always wanted the latest equipment and to try the newest thing on the front page, and he would come – he would go to meetings. He was on the state board, the KPA board, uh –

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 too, for several years, and he was president of the KPA, but he would come back with – he was – we were going to have a new – well, it was when computers first came in and he was – we started out with QuarkXPress and then after a while changed to InDesign and, and for me, I loved 'em after I learned to use them, but I always just lived in dread of this new thing that was coming in and that I was going to have to learn and how hard it was going to be.

And Howard was not a computer person at all so he didn't even use that kind of thing very much, just the basics. And I always thought, you know, for someone who isn't techie and doesn't want to do this kinda thing, but he always knew that we needed it –

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 and saw that we got it, and it usually – and it always worked out.

*Maddie Hall:* What do you see as the biggest moments in Kansas journalism history?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, probably back in the time of William Allen White and because of his national, his government connections and his work on the –. He was one of the ones who brought the Progressive Party to Kansas and recognized more of the social part of – the social services part of government. And those were big years of change. Uh –.

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*Maddie Hall:* Would you say that William Allen White is one of the most influential people in Kansas journalism history?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, absolutely, yeah, I do think so, and several other people who were influential were people who had started out working for him in Emporia. I also think the Harris newspaper chain, the newspaper group, was a big factor, and they had a news – a bureau in the Capitol, and in those days we – out here in smaller communities, we really got good reporting on the state level and on the – you know, for the whole state –

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 and people like that were really important.

*Maddie Hall:* Did you belong to any other professional news organizations?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Yeah, well, we belonged to NNA but – the National Newspaper Association, but, um – and we went to a couple of conventions, not too many. We weren't – it seems like we were always too busy.

*Maddie Hall:* Was there a particular moment early in your career when you realized I'm a real journalist now?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, when I was in Abilene working for the *Reflector-Chronicle*, during the two years that I was there, living there, Eisenhower came to Abilene. I think it was when they were –

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 opening or they were opening the Eisenhower Library, maybe, 'cause I know that was being born – being built when I was there, but anyway, it was my first experience with, you know, the national press corps, and I went over – I went to take pictures, to take photographs, and I was just – I couldn't believe that they were rude and they were, you know, everybody was just pushing each other around to get to the – where they could get the best picture. And it was -- it was just a wake-up call. It was real journalism, I guess, that I had never seen on that level.

*Maddie Hall:* What was it like having President Eisenhower come to Abilene?

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*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it was great, you know, it was a great day for the town, and we had big coverage of it. And I got to cover his speech and, yeah, it was big. And the – you know, I had never been around the Secret Service or any of that before, so, it was pretty exciting.

*Maddie Hall:* And since then did you ever cover any other big national figures?

*Sharon Kessinger:* When we were in Oberlin, we were just, I believe, 30 miles from McCook, Nebraska, and we went over there to see Bobby Kennedy when he came to speak there.

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 And that was pretty interesting. And, it's – it was pretty much of a thrill for us to get to see, up close, you know, these big national figures.

*Maddie Hall:* Did you ever consider quitting journalism to do something else with your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, no, I didn't. I think journalism is really an interesting field to be in, and there is – you never know when you go to work what's going to be – happen that day or, you know, what you're going to be doing or covering or, or just experiencing. And I can't think of anything – There are lots of things –

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 that I think, oh, I'd like to – I wish I had done that, but I just wish I could have done that, too, I guess. So I don't -- I don't think we ever – I ever thought of doing anything different.

*Maddie Hall:* What inspired you to continue to write for the *Advocate* after your retirement?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it was just what I had always done and I liked it and, and enjoyed doing it, and so our daughter Sarah came back to the *Advocate* in 2008, and she had been in journalism, worked for the Harris papers and different places and different – she worked for the *Mexico City Daily News* for a year.

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 And because her major was journalism and Spanish and so she went down there to work. And so, she was a good journalist and her dad had always wanted her to come back and she always said she didn't want to, she'd rather – she wanted to go maybe where there were more Spanish speakers or, you know, just different places. But, in 2008 she had, you know, decided that she would come back.

And partly because of her children, she really kind of wanted to get them out of – they were in high school then and she thought this was a better place to raise them than in Topeka. And so, she consented to move back and then she owns the paper now and is the editor/publisher.

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 And that's great. And so I tried – I am really retired now and I help out a little bit down there but – and for – until just recently – well, until COVID, I guess, I would go in on Wednesdays and help bundle papers and take papers around to the stores and just – that's just a, you know, a job that doesn't require much thinking, but it was just something that I always enjoyed. And, but mostly I just try to stay out of the way down there. I like going in, but – and I've been able to fill in for people, the obituary writer for one, who was on six weeks maternity leave and to, you know, do some different things.

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*Maddie Hall:* What do you think contributes to the *Advocate's* such high readership in Marysville?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, that – you know, that goes back, way back in history that there used to be two newspapers here, the *Marshall County News* and the *Advocate,* and they really did compete, and I – you know, I've looked at the files of those papers, and they – although they were both – well, one was a biweekly and the other one was a weekly, but they really did compete for stories and advertising, of course. And eventually, the *Advocate* bought out the other paper before we were ever here.

But I think that just the fact that they were just good community newspapers and the people always felt –

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 a part of that and we have – we still have a lot of circulation of people who have moved to California or –. I mean I can't really tell you how many states we send papers to, but there – and we have, oh, people here who buy a subscription for their kids when they go off to college. And then the kids come back and say that their roommates are reading their paper every week from a place that they don't even know anything about. But, anyway, that's kind of a high to think that it's relevant.

*Maddie Hall:* Well, that – thank you so much. That is the last question for Part 3 of the series.

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*Lacey Gregory:* This is Lacey Gregory. Today is Oct. 8, 2020. I'm interviewing Sharon Kessinger of the *Marysville Advocate* for the Inside Stories: Oral Histories of Kansas Journalists project. This is part four. This interview is taking place remotely due to the COVID pandemic, and this interview is sponsored by the University of Kansas and the Kansas Press Association.

What was the newsroom environment like at the *Advocate*? How did women, or 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?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, in the *Advocate*, my husband and I shared the position, although my husband, Howard, was always the editor/publisher. I was co-publisher –

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co-editor/publisher and so he, you know, of course always -- someone had to have the last word. So, we always accepted that it was Howard. And, but we had women and men working in our newsroom. A lot of different, different people at different times. And I think women always -- it was just kind of a sharing thing. We had a lot of -- we had a lot of discussions. People were invited to express their opinions and, and they, you know, Howard always listened, and we always valued their opinions and their help and them keeping us from making a lot of mistakes probably.

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I don't … it didn't seem like a sexist or, in a bad sense of the word, place to be. I know that our -- we have three daughters and we raised them to think for themselves and be strong women. And not that we had anything to do with it really, but they are. And they at times thought their dad was -- was sexist, I think, and, they would point things out to him that he was doing in the office that he shouldn't be doing, like sending someone to get gum for him *[laughs]* or do something for him that they thought –

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was below their job level. But it was -- it was a learning process for all of us, but I don't think -- I think women were considered equals in our newsroom, and we just didn't run into -- we didn't have people very often that, or that I can remember that, felt that they weren't being treated fairly. And a lot of the decisions in our newsroom were made by -- through some kind of a compromise and –

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there was a lot of give and take. But when you're in a newsroom in a small newspaper where you have to do just about everything and you don't have the luxury of spending a lot of time discussing things, but we pretty well understood each other. And, and, I think one of your questions was, how did men outside of the newspaper treat women and it's like anyplace, I think. We -- there were, I mean there were men who were very sexist and, and wouldn't like to talk to a woman, for instance, back when we first started but, uh –

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 a lot of people who respected women as well. So I don't -- I just don't remember a lot of -- it's been a long time since we, it seems like, since we were just starting out in the newspaper business and I just don't remember that we had a lot of conflicts.

*Lacey Gregory:* What were career advancement options like for women during your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, since we owned the newspaper, you know, I wasn't looking for a career option at that time. We were just trying to put out a good newspaper and trying to learn all we could and do all we could and make it financially stable, as well as a good –

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a good, solid newspaper. And we did -- we hired – often in a small newspaper you can hire like people coming out of college for their first job. And we did that quite a bit because we could afford it and we had some interns. And women who worked for us would stay maybe a couple of years and, and then move on to a bigger paper, where their opportunities were -- there were more opportunities for them. And we were always very happy and very proud of the people who worked for us who did succeed and have good careers in the –

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in journalism, but –

*Lacey Gregory:* What were – excuse me.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Go ahead. No, go ahead.

*Lacey Gregory:* What were the advantages of being a woman journalist throughout your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, for me, of course, it was -- the advantage was that I could set my own work hours and we -- Howard and I both worked long hours, but I got to kind of pick and choose what I would do and -- but often what I did was just dictated by what we needed to have done. We all -- most everyone in our newsroom always took photographs and –

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wrote and I was -- we were both editors and then we later -- we were fortunate to have a really good staff and we had a woman [Sally Carlson Gray] who had her degree in journalism from KU and had worked on the Indianapolis paper and, you know, had experience, and she came to work for us when she and her husband moved back to our area, and she's still working there. And she's very good and she's been the news editor for a lot of years, and we value her work and her opinions, but I liked writing –

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feature stories, stories about human interest stories, stories about people and that was something that I did quite a bit of because I was able to. I liked it. And I wrote a column for quite a few years and I really feel that I was very fortunate in what we did and in the -- that I had the chance to do that work.

*Lacey Gregory:* What would you say were some of the disadvantages of being a woman journalist throughout your career?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I don't -- I don't know of particularly [dis]advantages.

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Maybe there were times when I would have liked to have been able to do more, well, we called hard news. But we were able to usually hire someone who did that. Howard did a lot of that. We had a lot of different writers through the years who did that. And so what I was doing was more of what I wanted to do *[laughs]* and I -- what I enjoyed doing.

*Lacey Gregory:* Were there any times during your career when you felt uncomfortable as a woman journalist, whether that be in the newsroom or maybe with sources?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, I don't think so. I don't think I ever experienced –

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people -- anyone who wouldn't talk to me because I was a woman. I think that, I mean, I certainly ran into people who didn't wanna talk to the newspaper, but it wasn't gender-related, I don't think. It's funny. I just really don't -- can't think of any disadvantages.

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

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it was hard. And when we first bought the *Herald* in Oberlin there, we converted a closet in the basement of our home and made it into a darkroom.

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And I had learned to do, to develop and print film and that kinda thing, and I liked taking pictures. I took a lot of pictures, but so did Howard and other people on the staff. And, so, that's one thing our daughters always remember is that when they were little kids, on Tuesday nights or Monday and Tuesday nights, they always had to go to bed early and I would go to the basement and develop and print the pictures for that week's paper. One of the advantages of that was that we, you know, we had -- we used film in those days, and when we needed to develop a roll of film for that week's paper and there were several frames left –

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on the roll, we usually took pictures of the kids. So we have a lot of pictures of our kids *[laughs]* in those days, but my -- our girls -- we were fortunate to find good day care for them and after they got -- after they started school, it was less of that, and I could generally, you know, be home when I needed to be. And our home was -- has always been close to our office and so our kids always knew where we were and –

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we usually knew where they were, I think. But I think it worked out well. And our daughters and our son, Mike, always worked or, you know, cleaning the office or taking tearsheets or running errands for the *Advocate*. And so our oldest daughter vowed she'd never -- she was never going to be in the newspaper business because she didn't really enjoy cleaning the office. But our second daughter maybe she didn't have to clean so much. Maybe she did other things, but she's a journalist now. And, and then our younger daughter, I think she has good memories of riding her skateboard into the office and –

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getting people upset about that and *[laughs]* – but they all have good stories about their days in the office. So, it's been a family affair for a long time.

*Lacey Gregory:* Yeah. Speaking of your family, how did you and your husband feel about your daughter, Sarah, taking over the family business?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it had been a dream of Howard's to -- that she would come back and take over the paper, I think, and, so he would mention it to her every now and then. But she had -- well, her education was in journalism and Spanish, and she had worked on the *Mexico City Daily News* for a year and gone to Costa Rica on a -- when she was at KU for her graduate work. And so she always said, well, she thought she would like to get a job –

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or work more in the southern United States or places where there was more chance to speak in a different language. And so it wasn't until she was – oh, well, it was her children who I think caused her to decide to come, to move back to Marysville because she wanted to have them in school here instead of in the school in Topeka. And so that's really kind of what brought her back here. And, but so we were very happy to have her and very proud of her today. *[Laughs]* She's doing a great job, by the way. And these are hard -- these are kind of hard times but she's –

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doing very well and putting, still putting out a paper that is an asset to the community, I think. Our –

*Lacey Gregory:* Were any of your other children ever interested in pursuing a career in journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, yes, our son, Mike. he was a sports writer, and he worked at the *Garden City Telegram* and the *Hays Daily News* and, but unfortunately he was working at the *News* when it was part of the Harris group and it was sold to a large corporation [New Media Investment Group] that routinely just came and slashed the news side of the papers. So, he was a sports writer and editor there, but his job -- he was the last one hired so his job was the first to go.

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And, then, so then he worked just as a general assignment reporter at the *Hays Daily,* but that also, that job also was cut after not too long. And so he's not in the -- he's not in the journalism field anymore.

*Lacey Gregory:* How did you gain confidence in your ability to be a journalist?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I think when I started out I didn't -- I didn't know anything. I mean I really didn't know what – my education in journalism was good but limited and, and I guess my interests were more in the field of literature and things like that at K-State.

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And so I hadn't really paid a lot of attention to what it's like to be on a real newspaper. And even I worked on the *Collegian* and was editor of the *Collegian* and then advertising manager of the *Collegian,* so I knew how to do that, but that was kind of different than being in your own community newspaper. So, I just, as I worked and found out what I was doing and, and what this job was like, I became more confident. And I think that's the way probably most people are. You just gain confidence as you learn more.

*Lacey Gregory:* What kinds of journalism awards –

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did you win in your career and what impact did that have on you?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I didn't always win, but sometimes I got second or something in column writing or, you know, for different stories or that kind of thing. We did a lot of community development work as part of our job as publishers of the paper, and so we earned, well, like the Kansas Main Street Award of Excellence in 2006, and Howard was inducted into the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame in 2007. And he was named the William Allen White, whatever they call it –

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Editor of the Year, I believe, and then I was named the William Allen White Editor of the Year later in a different year. And we received a Distinguished Service Award at K-State for, as we were -- it was called the Alumni Fellow Award, and it was for our work in promoting and working with a downtown redevelopment project here in Marysville, well, in both of the towns we were in, Oberlin and in Marysville. Let's see. Our paper was written up in the -- Ron Wilson, who's director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at KSU –

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he wrote a column [See Appendix] that was sent out to all -- to papers all around the area and we were written up in that. And, I think, oh, it was called the *Kansas Profile,* I believe. I don't know. Just some things like that.

*Lacey Gregory:* I see that you and Howard received the Outstanding Citizenship Award from Marysville Kiwanis in 2010 and the LOVE, L-O-V-E, Marysville Community Service Award in 2013. Why did you win those awards and what did it mean to receive those honors?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, it was very nice, and I guess just -- I suppose we won -- we were given those awards – Howard always said you get those when you get old. But, at any rate, we –

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just for the work that we had done, promoting the community and we both did a lot of volunteer work as well as professional work.

*Lacey Gregory:* Mm, Howard received the Kansas Press Association's Clyde M. Reed Jr. Master Editor Award in 1999.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Uh-huh.

*Lacey Gregory:* What do you think your husband's journalism legacy is?

*Sharon Kessinger:* I think his journalism legacy is for publishing a really good community newspaper for his entire career. I think that, that award was probably for he wrote editorials faithfully every week for, let's see, 35 years or 40 years or something like that.

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And a lot it wasn't really too common for newspapers of our size to always have editorial comments, but Howard always believed that the – and we both always believed that was really important not just so that we could influence people but just so we could make people think and, and make people -- more people become more involved in their community.

*Lacey Gregory:* Did you ever have a mentor or a role model when you started your career in journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, when I was at K-State, [C.J.] “Chief” Medlin was a professor of journalism, and I suppose he was my mentor while I was in college. And then the first newspaper –

*[0:25:00]*
I worked for was owned and published by Clyde Reed from Parsons, and he had just purchased the paper in Pryor Creek, Oklahoma, and so it was my first newspaper job out of college. And he sent me down there to be the news editor of this paper, and it was, you know, it was just a small daily, but it was very interesting. And I always learned a lot from him. He would come down and, and sort of set the stage for the next week at the paper. And, but aside from that I don't know about mentors. We had good friends who were in journalism and some that we had known at college and others that we met along the way.

*[0:26:00]*

And I think your fellow journalists are among your best role models and your best mentors maybe.

*Lacey Gregory:* How would you define a successful career in journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I think being able to do what you like to do and doing it as well as you can. I think a successful career would be being successful in helping a community, shaping –

*[0:27:00]*

well, informing people and giving people things to think about that would be improving their community and just not being – it's all right to be controversial, but not just for the sake of being controversial. It's important for people to know that, you know, you have an opinion and they have an opinion and that neither one is necessarily always right. But, if you're willing to listen to other people, you can -- usually you can get along. In a small paper you might be covering the –

*[0:28:00]*

one of the government bodies on Monday night, and Tuesday morning you're gonna meet the people that you disagreed with in the coffee shop *[laughs]* or the people that you wrote an editorial about or that you disagreed with the week before, and you're gonna meet 'em in the coffee shop or at a meeting or something like that, and you learn to get along with people and, and listen to people, which I think is very important. Um –

*Lacey Gregory:* What qualities, do you think are the most important for advancing in your career in journalism?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, one quality I think is curiosity, just being interested in many things and, and interested in what's going on.

*[0:29:00]*

And seeing how it all fits together and how you can do -- you can just make suggestions that sometimes are picked up and become a reality. You have to have the confidence and the courage to express your opinion even if you know it's not, maybe not the general opinion in your community at the time. But -- and I think people learn to respect you if you don't always think you're right, but you think that this is worth thinking about and maybe you can influence good things. Um –

*[0:30:00]*

 Some of the best reporters we've had were the ones who had the most curiosity about things. Just general curiosity was -- is a great quality I think for a journalist.

*Lacey Gregory:* And how has journalism changed since you entered the field, both in terms of technology and content?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, of course, the way the paper is printed and put together and just there's less physical labor involved and a lot more, um – computers made a big difference because you *[laughs]* you have to get up and walk around once in a while because you can sit at your desk all day. And, and you're never bored.

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 But it's changed. When we first started, of course, the paper was letterpress. The work we did was -- there was just a lot more physical work to do and that all changed. One result of that – well, when we started, when we went from – well, course we went to offset printing and using computers and, you know, we don't paste-up pages anymore as we did before. That's all done, of course, on the computer. And so that's -- the result of that is that you have fewer people working on the, you know –

*[0:32:00]*

physically putting the paper together, setting the type and resetting it and just putting it together has shifted a lot of the load. Like in papers our size, it shifted a lot of the load from the back shop to the newsroom where now the -- a lot of people who are writers and editors are also doing page design and, and, making a lot of decisions about the -- how different stories are played and that kind of thing. It used to be more of a set way of doing it because it was pretty laborious to change it after you -- once you had it on the page.

*[0:33:00]*

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

*Sharon Kessinger:* Oh, you know, one of the things I meant to say as far as something that is a huge change is that there's so much more information available now, you know, there's nothing you can't Google and find out anymore and all of those things that we had to go find a book for and, and look it up and that kind of thing, we can now find in a minute on the internet. And, so, the internet has, oh –

*[0:34:00]*

 there's such a load of information now, it's way more than the human brain can even handle, I think. Okay, I'm sorry. Your last -- that question was –

*Lacey Gregory:* Your thoughts on the state of journalism today.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Journalism today, right … we've gone through some really hard times, and it seemed that at first that it affected the larger publications more and, and now it's kind of, you know, trickled down to affecting our community newspapers, and a lot of 'em have, of course, have closed or sold out to a chain or something like that. So it's -- I think there are a lot of people who were journalists who are now doing something else because there just aren't that –

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aren't as many jobs in journalism. Economics has a lot to do with that, of course, but still, I mean just what papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and papers like that are doing is pretty fantastic, I think, and it gives me hope that journalism will survive because in the long haul people are going to need journalists and need to have sources that are reliable and factual and the internet is not the place to find that. So I think it just all has to be kind of sorted out because –

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you know, large chunks of our population are getting their news from sources that aren't factual and don't really care about the truth. And it's a challenge. It's a challenge to our country, to our democracy, because there's such little regard for the truth on -- from some sources.

*Lacey Gregory:* What do you think should be the mission of media today, and talk a little bit more about the media's role in democracy.

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I think it's -- the role of the newspaper hasn't changed all that much.

*[0:37:00]*

It's just been -- it's broadened. But it's -- I, well, I think, as far as the effect on our democracy, I think that the founders of our country were well aware that democracy was an experiment that would survive only if the citizens were informed and/or educated and informed. And we've gone through a lot of ups and downs on that level, but I, in the long run, I really do have hope that –

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 when this all kind of gets sorted out, people will be able to make a living as a journalist and tell the truth and, you know, contribute to a better, a better country.

*Lacey Gregory:* So what do you see as the future for media and how long do you think newspapers will be around?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I'd like to *[laughs]* I'd like to think that they will be around and possibly not in a paper form but maybe in a, on –

*[0:39:00]*
you know, on an online form for a long time. But there -- there will be -- people will discover that you need to be able to depend on your sources being vetted and it can be pretty much of a disaster if too many people lose confidence in journalists, journalism. And, you know, we've seen a lot of effort to discredit and to erode public trust in journalists. I don't know how that will come out, but I don't think it looks good for our -- it will be good for our country if that happens.

*[0:40:00]*

*Lacey Gregory:* What do you want your media outlet, the *Advocate*, to be known for?

*Sharon Kessinger:* Well, I guess I want it to be known for just keeping our community informed and, and, not only on what's going on in the -- with the county commissioners and the city council and the school board but – that's important and we have to continue to do that, but also in just knowing what's going on with people in your community and your hospital and your social services and things that people need and are going to need more and more. And we're seeing it right now of course with COVID and the –

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suddenly the role of our county health officer is much more, much more important than it has seemed to be. It was just something that we took for granted before, but it's pretty important now. And, but I think as far as the newspaper goes, I just want us to be remembered for being a part of the community and, and a good influence on the community.

*Lacey Gregory:* And how do you want to be remembered?

*Sharon Kessinger:* *[Laughs]* Oh, I, well, I've been retired for several years and, and I've spent a lot of my time volunteering in –

*[0:42:00]*

in the arts and in -- I'm involved with the board of a museum here, a house museum. And I -- and a house where we are trying to restore the historic gardens, which I just love. And I spend a lot of time outdoors and have a growing appreciation for nature and how it relates to our lives. And so I guess I hope to be remembered as a lady who has made the community more beautiful and made the arts more available. But as far as I'd like to, as far as my career, I would just like to remember, be remembered as a good writer and a person with a –

*[0:43:00]*
sense of humor and a good sense of community and what it means.

*Lacey Gregory:* Okay, Sharon. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't had a chance to touch on?

*Sharon Kessinger:* No, I don't think so. I was thinking about this, but I guess I've already said our system of government was formed to be a democratic system, and we have -- it's served us for a long time and it's been a worthwhile experiment and it's -- we're one of a kind in the world, I think.

*[0:44:00]*

And I think that our founders were correct in, you know, organizing and passing laws and amendments that protect people. And I do think we have a long ways to go on the race, racial issues, which I think we can solve that, though, because when I watch TV and watch the news and I see people of all races and genders and nationalities, ethnic backgrounds working together I think, you know, it's really –

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there is really a reality there that maybe our laws and our -- some of our habits have not caught up with. And I think we just need to be -- keep working on it and we can do what we set our minds to do.

*Lacey Gregory:* Okay. Well, this is the conclusion of this oral history.

*[End of Audio]*

Appendix

https://kspress.com/jameson-henry-b

A native of Kentucky, Henry B. Jameson moved to Kansas at an early age. He became publisher of the Abilene Reflector-Chronicle, a paper from which he admitted he was once fired as a “lousy” carrier boy.

Jameson spent 11 years with the Associated Press, including three years in Europe during World War II. He was the first Allied correspondent to be wounded in the D-Day invasion of France.

He returned to Kansas and, after a brief stint at the Lawrence Journal-World, moved back to Abilene and purchased the Chronicle.

Jameson wrote a book about President Dwight Eisenhower, a native of Abeline, which chronicled little-known ancedotes of his rise to the presidency. It was Eisenhower himself who suggested to Jameson that he should write a book.

https://kspress.com/woodword-ernest

Born in Glasco in 1898, Ernest Woodward moved from Topeka to Oberlin in 1928 with the purchase of the Oberlin Times. In 1930 the paper was consolidated with the Herald, and in 1948 Woodward bought out his partner’s interest. He continued to publish the Herald until 1966.

Woodward was five times elected to the Kansas Legislature as a state representative. He maintained his keen interest in politics and state government after he resigned from the House following the 1969 session, when he learned he had terminal cancer.

Typically, he put the interests of his constituents first, saying that they deserved a rigorous, able-bodied representative, even though he loved the legislature and time would have permitted him to finish his term.

Following his death in January of 1971, Howard Kessinger wrote of Woodward, “Emotions get in the way when a man of this caliber is remembered.”

https://kspress.com/reed-clyde-m-sr

Clyde Reed, Sr., was born October 19, 1871, in Champaign county, Illinois, and came to Kansas with his family in 1875. He spent 30 years with the railway mail service before quitting to publish the Parsons Sun.

Reed had a stormy career in Kansas politics. He served as Kansas governor from 1929 to 1931, but lost the Republican nomination for a second term. He was elected to the United States senate in 1938 and was re-elected in 1944.

He died November 8, 1949, at age 78. In a telegram addressed to the family, President Harry Truman referred to Reed as, “my friend and colleague through all the years when our work in the senate brought us in daily association.”

Fred Brinkerhoff, who delivered the eulogy at Reed’s funeral, said: “The late senator was as courageous as he was intelligent. There was no false bravery in the manner with which he met his enemies. There was no insincerity in this fearlessness. There was real valor in the manner in which he made his decisions.”

https://kspress.com/reed-clyde-m-jr

A native of Parsons, Clyde Reed, Jr. was the son of U.S. Senator Clyde Reed, Sr. He graduated from Parsons High School and earned a political science degree from the University of Kansas in 1937.

Reed became publisher of the Parsons Sun in 1949. He served as president of the Kansas Press Association and the William Allen White Foundation.

He was named Kansas Editor of the Year by the White Foundation in 1963, and in 1973 was named as the first recipient of the “Outstanding State Publisher” award presented by the K.U. chapter of Kappa Tau Alpha. He also received a Distinguished Service Award from the University of Kansas Alumni Association.

https://www.huckboydinstitute.org/kansas-profiles/profiles/archives/2000.html

Meet Howard and Sharon Kessinger. They are owners and publishers of the Marysville Advocate in Marysville, Kansas. It was Howard and Sharon who found their way to Estonia in the summer of the year 2000. But that was just one example of an international vision exhibited by these two journalists with rural roots.
Howard Kessinger grew up at Wellington, Kansas. He went to K-State, where he met Sharon while they were both studying journalism. After graduation, Howard worked in newspaper advertising until he made a trip to a New York ad agency. Howard says, "I decided that wasn't what I wanted to do. I like newspapers, and I like to work in small communities."
So Howard made a change. He became editor of the newspaper in Oberlin, and he and Sharon got married shortly after. They were there for 14 years, starting to buy the paper a couple of years after they moved there.
In 1975, the opportunity arose to come to the newspaper in Marysville, which is near where Sharon had grown up. Her parents actually lived in the nearby town of Winifred, which is estimated today to have a population of about 20 people. Now, that's rural.
While she was growing up at Winifred, Sharon's family subscribed to the Marysville Advocate, and she had even worked there at the paper one summer. So there were several connections, and it seemed like a good opportunity in a nice community. Howard and Sharon bought the newspaper and moved to Marysville. Now they are celebrating their 25th year with the newspaper. The paper itself has been published for 115 years. Wow.
The Kessingers got very involved in the community of Marysville. They supported efforts to restore the historic Koester Block, worked to enhance Main Street, supported downtown redevelopment, worked at the museum, restored the historic white bronze statues and fountain on the Koester House Museum grounds, supported community arts, and even worked with Habitat for Humanity. Sharon says with a smile, "Howard can't drive a nail, so he had to do other things." He served as secretary for Habitat, which has renovated or built homes for people in Marysville and surrounding communities. Howard and Sharon also raised three daughters and a son.
At one point, Howard and Sharon became involved in a project of the National Newspaper Association. The goal of the project was to reach out to journalists in the former Soviet Union, where a free press had not been allowed for most of the century. This international interest came easily to the Kessingers. They have hosted several foreign exchange students through such programs as Rotary and 4-H.
So the Kessingers hosted an editor from Estonia for five weeks. He visited journalism departments at K-State and elsewhere. This made for good international fellowship, but it was also educational.
Sharon says, "Our friend in Estonia says he has tried to apply some of the things we do here." Newspapers have been redesigned and the economy is better.
In the summer of 2000, Howard and Sharon made a return trip. They went from Kansas to Estonia. Their travel included a train trip to St. Petersburg, Russia and a trip by steamer to Stockholm, Sweden. They visited their international friends as well as the origins of Sharon's family.
Now they are back in Kansas, where their newspaper makes a real contribution to the community. Today, the Marysville Advocate has the highest paid circulation of any community weekly in the state, about 5,600. And their newspaper has been on-line for four years.
So is the international travel the highlight? Sharon says, "Our real highlight is once a week when the paper comes out. It's a great feeling when you see people wanting to get their newspaper."
Howard says, "The nice thing about being a community journalist is being involved, and trying to improve things." Sharon adds, "It's a lot of fun. People in other parts of the world don't have that opportunity."
It's time to say goodbye to Estonia, where two journalists have been visiting all the way from rural Kansas. We commend Howard and Sharon Kessinger, for making a difference in their community as well as around the globe.