

American Women Journalists' Stories, Struggles Chronicled

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Gayle Reaves Dallas Morning News

From Eleanor Roosevelt's press conferences to Tokyo Rose's trial, they broke ground for their sisters. From Harlem to Honolulu, they worked in the trenches of wars and women's pages from the early years of this century.

As journalists, their job was to chronicle the history of their era as it happened. But as the years passed, many of the women feared that the story of their own struggle against discrimination was being lost.

Thanks to Texan Peggy Simpson and others, however, the history of American women journalists in this century is being preserved. More than that, it is being fashioned into a tool to teach future generations of news professionals about people like Vivian Castleberry, Marvel Cooke, Ruth Cowan and Jane Eads.

The tool is "Women in Journalism," a series of extensive audio- and videotape interviews with 56 women whose achievements, from the 1920s to the '90s, helped change the lot of women in their profession and the coverage of women by their news organizations.

Sponsored by the Washington Press Club Foundation, the project required eight years and more than \$600,000. By the time it was complete, the interviewers had captured pieces of history preserved nowhere else. The women themselves recount their battles for jobs, for stories, for recognition, for equality.

The interviews illuminate the trailblazing role played by minority women. Marvel Cooke, one of the first labor organizers in the African American press, told interviewers about refusing to use the back door of a Park Avenue building to get inside to do an interview, about hiring on as a maid to help in her story about the "Bronx slave market" for underpaid, often cheated domestic workers.

Forty years after that, veteran broadcaster Carole Simpson recounted for the project that she continued to face racial remarks and stereotyping at ABC.

From Texas, Vivian Castleberry, longtime women's section editor of the Dallas Times Herald, described her fights to obtain coverage of issues such as child care, birth control and prostitution. Former television journalist Barbara Tanabe cried as she recalled her groundbreaking reportage on the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Ruth Cowan became a war correspondent for The Associated Press in the 1940s, after being fired from United Press when higher-ups learned that she was a woman. Katherine Beebe was sent on outside assignments that often produced spectacular stories, like the trial of Tokyo Rose, because her presence in the office made men uncomfortable.

Jane Eads hopped fences with Eleanor Roosevelt to cover the first lady's activities. And Ginny Pitt put her foot down and refused to run her wire service's story on Margaret Thatcher's election until the lead was rewritten to take out the description of England's first woman prime minister as a "peaches-and cream blonde."

"Some of these stories are really quite remarkable," says project director Donita Moorhus. "You read these transcripts; you get the flavor of the way things have changed ... but haven't changed at all."

The beginning of the oral history project came with the end of the Washington Press Club.

The group was the successor to the Women's National Press Club, founded as an alternative to the National Press Club, which for many years barred women as full members. In 1971, the women's organization was renamed the Washington Press Club and began to admit men as members. Only then did the National Press Club agree to admit women journalists.

In 1985, the two organizations merged. The Washington Press Club Foundation was created to take over that former club's assets.

Peggy Simpson, a North Texas State University (now University of North Texas) graduate who has worked in Washington for The Associated Press, Boston Herald, Hearst Newspapers and Ms. Magazine, feared that the history of the Washington Press Club would be lost. She also wanted to document the history of the women who had lost their jobs in newsrooms to men returning from World War II.

“I just felt strongly that we should do something to preserve the history of breaking barriers for women in journalism,” Simpson, 56, says. “I wanted to capture our history before the folks who lived it died.

“I realized I didn’t know what had happened to women journalists 20 years older than I,” she says. The result was the oral history project, begun with seed money from the Washington Press Club Foundation and accomplished with contributions from many groups, most of them journalism-oriented.

Several of the women interviewed attended a reception Dec. 7 in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the project’s completion.

“The feeling of the wealth of history and talent in that room ... I will never forget,” says Marilyn Schultz, journalism professor at the University of Texas, whose story is included in the project. “When I looked around at the people, many of the women on canes and walkers, and yet the power was so strong.”