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## From Society Page to Front Page

Eileen M. Wirth

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FROM *Society Page*  
TO **Front Page**  
NEBRASKA WOMEN IN JOURNALISM

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★ ★ EILEEN M. WIRTH ★ ★

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN & LONDON

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Set in Minion Pro by Laura Wellington.

Designed by A. Shahan.

In memory of my dad, Austin Wirth,  
who ordered me to take a journalism class,  
and to my professional mentors,  
the late Wilma Crumley and Mary McGrath

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## Preface

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This book about the first century of Nebraska women in journalism is for everyone who helped open opportunities to women in any field. It's also for younger people who want to know more about what Mom and Grandma went through to create opportunities for them and for those who simply like good stories about colorful women. The women in this book were suffragists, "flapper journalists," White House correspondents, war correspondents, Rosie the Reporters, local publishers, and pioneers in broadcasting. Some roamed the globe covering the Russian Revolution and the Vietnam War, while others made their impact on small Nebraska towns. Although only Willa Cather is a household name, you'll meet memorable women such as a 102-year-old columnist, members of a wire service bureau in World War II who agreed to be fired at its end, and the editor of a major suffragist newspaper published in Beatrice, Nebraska.

When I began researching this book, friends elsewhere kiddingly asked if there was anything to write about. Initially I wasn't sure because media history focuses on the national rather than the local and even national women get limited attention. However, as I dug through a myriad of sources, I was amazed at the treasures I found. As I completed my first draft, a Wisconsin colleague in women's history expressed envy at my wealth of subjects to cover, including Willa Cather, Clara Bewick Colby, Rheta Childe Dorr, Bess Furman, Marianne Means, and others.

I undertook this study because I teach media history at Creighton University, and I participated in the integration of women into city news at the *Omaha World-Herald*, where I was a re-

porter from 1969 to 1980. Like many of my contemporaries, I was angry about the sexism and ageism that surfaced in the coverage of Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign. It seemed to disregard and disrespect my generation of women and our struggles for equal opportunity. It hit me that most of our efforts were quiet, local, and all but invisible even to our coworkers although the national struggles for equality had been highly publicized. I could not recall ever reading anything about the integration of women into local media in the 1970s and decided to tell this story.

Then Heather Lundine of the University of Nebraska Press offered a greater challenge. Instead of focusing just on the baby boomers, she told me to research Nebraska's women journalists from the 1870s to the 1970s. What a revelation! I discovered that we boomers were merely a link in a chain of amazing women going back to the Victorian era. These historic stories begged to be told and placed in context—a mission that I became even more passionate about after speaking to a group of older women at the Loyola University School of Communication in Chicago. After the talk, many shared memories that my stories had evoked, including a Peabody Award winner whose employer had hidden her from clients to keep them from realizing that a woman was working on their accounts. These women couldn't even challenge employers who advertised for "attractive" single women and fired them if they married or became pregnant. It reinforced my conviction that the women of the Nebraska press really do epitomize legions of women everywhere who sought a fuller life. I hope that many will be inspired to tell their own stories.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

We cannot fully understand the history of American media without studying regional and local journalism because that's where the bulk of journalists have worked, but most texts focus on national events and figures. The history of women in local media

is especially spotty. I hope that the light this project sheds on women journalists in a typical “flyover” state suggests the riches that other researchers might find in their areas. Maurine Beasley, one of the nation’s leading experts on women in media history, told me in a phone interview that she is unaware of any similar longitudinal examination of women journalists in a single state. The fact that it produced such interesting results should encourage other researchers to adopt this research model.

My goal has been to write a historically accurate book aimed at general readers and students. Uncovering this history has been challenging because my sources were extremely scattered and many were not available online. Because there is limited material on many of the women I describe, full profiles were impossible to write, but the short segments flesh out the historical record. The bibliographic essay details my full research path and myriad of sources consulted, but I feel part of the importance of this book is that it pulls together unrelated pieces of information that collectively provide insights into the history of both Nebraska women and Nebraska journalism, thus preserving them for the state historical record.

This project also demonstrates the value of interviewing major figures in local journalism history to record their memories before it is too late. Several of my most helpful sources were over eighty, and at least three have died since our interviews. Much of the information in this book could never have been captured without the assistance of these journalistic veterans because the stories they shared can’t be Googled.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is organized chronologically except for a chapter on three giants of early Nebraska journalism: Elia Peattie, Willa Cather, and Clara Bewick Colby. There’s also a chapter on women of color in Nebraska journalism that cuts across several decades. I conclude with a chapter on the integration of women into

Omaha journalism in the 1970s and its results. The epilogue reflects briefly on the project. Chapters begin with historical scene setting then tell the stories of women from each period in addition to covering such things as pay, working conditions, and journalism education.

I conclude most chapters by analyzing samples of articles by and about women from the general and social news sections. Newspaper coverage of mundane local events often reveals more about how people lived than political history. I focus on coverage of women in the major Omaha and Lincoln papers because they circulated throughout the state, especially the *Omaha World-Herald*. Many of the articles are like family stories of life in “the olden days.”

Writing styles and story selections changed from decade to decade, and they offer wonderful insights into life and journalism in the various eras. I have paid particular attention to story selections because editors assign articles on topics that concern readers. The language used to describe women is important because it provided a lens through which contemporary readers viewed women and especially the way that women were socialized to view themselves. In most cases the issues examined are fairly random and thus hopefully typify the way contemporary media depicted women.

One challenge of writing a book on women is that their last names change with their marital status. Whenever possible I give the maiden and the married name on first reference and use whichever makes the most sense for a given period in a woman’s life on second reference, but total consistency is impossible.

#### A FINAL NOTE

The bulk of my Creighton journalism students have been women, and I have always been saddened that they know so little about what it took to open this field to them. I hope this book enriches their understanding of the contributions of women to journal-

ism so that they will be inspired to emulate these women. This book is my gift to them as well as to my children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Finally, I hope readers will love these women and learn from their achievements. Laugh, marvel, and enjoy! Be moved and inspired.

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# Acknowledgments

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I could not have written this book without the help of a great many people, including everyone I interviewed and those who led me to them, people who assisted me with research, and close friends who supported me through the process. Names of interviewees are listed in the bibliography, but a number of people deserve special thanks.

My sister, Janet Poley, suggested that I write about Nebraska women in journalism and offered numerous helpful suggestions in addition to being a constant cheerleader. Thanks, Jan!

Allen Beermann of the Nebraska Press Association and Patricia Gaster and Andrea Faling of the Nebraska State Historical Society guided me to sources and stories that I would never otherwise have found. I deeply appreciate their vast knowledge and their willingness to share it. Larry Walklin of the University of Nebraska College of Journalism was my primary source for information about historic women in broadcasting. Amy Forss of Metropolitan Community College generously shared her research on Nebraska's African American press and Mildred Brown. Mary Nash, Creighton University's peerless reference librarian, not only located a great deal of information for me but acted as if it were fun, which was typical of the entire staff of Reinert Alumni Library. My research assistant, Kyle McGinn, patiently verified references and formatted them properly. My administrative assistant Nichole Jelinek helped with countless computer tasks.

Although I quote Cornelia Flora of Iowa State University only sparingly, her insights into the sociology of midwestern women provided a framework for all the stories, especially the changes

of the 1960s. Beatrice Public Library director Lauren Riedesel provided references and background on Clara Bewick Colby that aided my understanding of not only Colby but also the suffragist movement.

Much of the fun in doing this book was reconnecting with veterans of Nebraska journalism and others who not only shared their memories and confirmed or clarified oral history tales but suggested leads for women to interview and contact information for them. Special thanks to Gilbert Savery, David Hamer, Robert Dorr, Mary McGrath, Beverly Pollock, Mary Heng-Braun, Alvin Goodwin, Lynne Grasz, Jan Kreuscher, Janet Pieper, James Clemon, Alfred “Bud” Pagel, Emil Reutzel, Arlo Grafton, Ruth Brown, Carol Zuegner, and the late Keith Blackledge. My apologies to anyone I have omitted from this list.

Beverly Deepe Kever, a distinguished Vietnam War correspondent, began as a source and became a supportive colleague as she labored over her own book on Vietnam for the University of Nebraska Press. Thanks also to Bren Ortega Murphy of Loyola University in Chicago for her many helpful suggestions and for inviting me to present my research there.

I am grateful to my family for its support, especially my mother, Kathleen McGowen Wirth; my brother Mark Wirth and nephew David Wirth; and my children, Raj and Shanti Psota. My close friends Liz Sundem, Jeanne Weeks, Jane O’Brien, and Dianne Travers-Gustafson offered suggestions when they read preliminary versions of chapters and managed to act interested for three years. So did my “Wine & Whine” group, Joyce Bunger, Robyn Eden, and Jan Kruse.

I have enjoyed working with the fine staff of the University of Nebraska Press, especially Heather Lundine, who challenged me to write a book about the first century of women in Nebraska women in journalism, not just the modern era, and Bridget Barry, who guided me in revising and completing this book and patiently responded to all questions. Thanks also to my copy editor, Barbara Wojhoski, for her work in fine-tuning the final text.

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FROM SOCIETY PAGE TO FRONT PAGE

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# Introduction

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I can see and hear it as if it were yesterday. The mint-green *Omaha World-Herald* newsroom stretched before me a block long. Cluttered, black-topped army surplus desks equipped with battered manual typewriters filled half of it. Teletype machines clattered rhythmically in the background, while a police dispatch radio broadcast a constant stream of calls that everyone seemed to ignore and the myriad phones rang constantly. Reporters answered promptly, hoping that news sources were responding to their urgent requests for return calls.

Copy editors labored over stories pasted into long scrolls of copy paper, cutting the last few inches off some to fit the space available. They printed their headlines in carbon pencil at the top, noting type size and number of columns. Pneumatic tubes whistled overhead when an editor sent completed copy to the linotype machines in the basement for typesetting. The atmosphere of controlled chaos seemed like something out of *Front Page*.

In a month or so, one of those big black desks would be mine when I joined the news staff after completing my graduate work at the University of Minnesota. Then it hit like a punch in the solar plexus. Where were the women?

At the *Lincoln Evening Journal*, where I had worked on the copy desk the previous summer, there were women reporters and copy editors, even a female assistant city editor. Where were they here? I looked more closely. Guys in white shirts and ties filled the long rows of reporters' desks. Then I saw a woman toward the back of room: Mary McGrath. That seemed to be it for city reporters, although actually there were a few more women

in the newsroom, including another reporter, a couple of support staffers, and two night copy editors.

Oh yes! In a distant corner of the room, a group of women were working behind one of the cast-iron fences that divided departments: Women's News or Society, "Sox" in newsroom slang. Probably not everyone was wearing a pastel dress that day, but all I could think of was a flower garden. It speaks volumes that the *World-Herald's* 1985 centennial history includes a chapter on the sports section but none on women's news. Only a few women's names even appear in the index. What was I getting into?

#### FAST FORWARD FORTY YEARS

Memories of that first visit flooded back when Business editor Patricia Waters, who has since retired, guided me on a tour of the modern newsroom. I had worked at the *World-Herald* for eleven years before leaving for a public relations job at Union Pacific Railroad in 1980 and finally becoming a journalism professor at Creighton University in 1991. I had not been in the newsroom since the newspaper had moved to a nearby corporate high-rise.

The changes were striking. On my first visit in 1969, I had walked upstairs to the newsroom, unimpeded by security guards. On this visit I had to sign in, get a visitor's badge, and wait for Pat to escort me to the third-floor newsroom. Her employee badge unlocked the door to a newsroom decorated in earth tones instead of institutional green. Gone also were all the clattering machines and the pneumatic tubes. Even the phones seemed muted, or maybe it was just that the upholstered cubicles absorbed their sound. No open rows of army surplus desks for today's reporters!

At first glance the newsroom (which still stretched for a block) might have been an insurance office. Pat halfway apologized, assuming correctly that I preferred the dump of yore because it was part of the romance of journalism. Gone were the hallway observation windows where awed school groups had watched us

like animals in the zoo. No one would ever again thrill Cub Scouts by yelling, “Stop the presses!” as an old timer supposedly did one dull day — all in fun, like other newsroom antics.

The major difference I had come to observe also was instantly apparent. Women filled at least a third of the desks in all areas of the room except Sports, where a single longtime staffer was the only female. “Everything but Sports is highly integrated,” said Waters, who had joined the paper in 1988 as editor of what is now called Living. Today most of the newsroom middle managers (who head sections or teams of reporters) are women, and assistant managing editor Joanne Stewart rates a private office overlooking the newsroom.

Unlike the old fences that demarcated departmental turf, it’s hard to tell where one section starts and another ends. Copy editors no longer sit around a horseshoe shaped “rim” with their boss occupying the “slot” but instead work in cubicles like reporters. Long gone are the scrolls of copy; editors access stories via computer and write headlines the same way, setting the computerized “cold type” with each keystroke. As Waters led me around the newsroom, I saw a few former colleagues who still worked at the paper as well as former students and other friends. Two of my Creighton journalism alums exemplified the difference between the paper then and now.

Lynn Safranek, who has since taken a non-news job in Chicago, had won awards for her coverage of police before joining the Page One team. In the early seventies, editors were nervous about assigning a woman to “cop house.” I covered the beat on Saturdays for several years, one of the first Omaha women reporters to do so, although I prayed every Friday that nothing would happen that would increase my chances of making a horrendous error. Some of the younger men who covered police fulltime hated covering the beat as much as I did, but they received valuable training in this entry-level hard-news assignment. No more are women denied this opportunity.

Over in Living (the successor to Women's News), Kevin Coffey covers music and pop culture, his dream job. His cubicle's shelves are filled with CDs. He was listening to one for a review as we strolled by. No more flower gardens in Living! Looking around, no one would guess that a quiet revolution to open this workplace to women was ever required.

Waters, a fellow native of Nebraska City, has worked in newsroom management for most of her career. After graduating from the University of Nebraska College of Journalism in 1975, she joined the *Fremont Tribune*, a Gannett Corporation newspaper. She rose from reporter to managing editor and could have become publisher if she had been willing to live in Fremont. However, by then she was commuting forty miles each way from an Omaha suburb where her husband had become a school principal, so she moved to the *World-Herald*.

In Fremont Waters benefited from Gannett's equal opportunity policies that opened top positions throughout the corporation to talented women. The *World-Herald* lacked such policies, but Waters found an informal mentor in another Nebraska City native, Deanna Sands, the paper's first woman managing editor. After her retirement Sands headed the national Associated Press Managing Editors (APME) group for a period.

Waters typifies another change in journalism from forty years ago. She is a mother who worked in news while raising her two now-grown children, something that would have been almost impossible in 1980, when I left the paper because I wanted a family. The hours were just too long and irregular to balance motherhood and reporting, but today's women journalists are less willing to sacrifice their personal lives for the paper. They can do this because they are thoroughly integrated into the mainstream of journalism, while we were still somewhat on the margins.

Waters salutes the early baby boomers for this change. "They showed the business world that women could do it."

## MY STORY

I didn't set out to be a groundbreaker for women in journalism, but as an early baby boomer there was no alternative if I wanted to report on social issues instead of society news. Closed doors begged to be opened; traditional ways of viewing women that made no sense had to be challenged as both a matter of justice and to achieve my goals. Times were good in the early 1970s and jobs plentiful, so my friends and I could take risks, too naive to realize they were risks.

I grew up on a farm near Nebraska City, the second of six bright, strong-willed, competitive children, sandwiched between an older sister who is one of the nation's leading experts on distance education and a younger sister who became the first woman fellow at Bell Labs. My three younger brothers also have had stellar careers, but only later did I realize how extraordinary our family was. My mother, an artist, had been valedictorian of her University of Nebraska class, while my father had a classically trained baritone voice. He had considered a career in music before family duty drove him back to the farm. My parents married during World War II while Mother was in college and they had thought Dad would be drafted. However, when the army decided that it needed farmers more to grow food than to fight, Dad remained in Nebraska City and Mother commuted there from Lincoln on weekends until she graduated. My parents placed a high premium on academic achievement and drove all of us to live up to our potential regardless of sex. Just keeping up in my family was tough, so I took refuge in books, reading everything I could find at the local public library while dreaming of distant places.

I needed to escape because as a short, pudgy, awkward nerd wearing glasses, I became a target for mean girls whose favorite sport was pushing me into trees during junior high. Mother promised that eventually life would get better, but my loathing for people who abuse the weak fueled later newspaper stories and my eagerness to combat unfairness to women. During these

miserable years, I decided to become a foreign correspondent because the journalists I read about like my hero, war correspondent Quentin Reynolds, seemed to lead exciting, fun lives. It never occurred to me that Reynolds and his fellow journalists were nearly all men.

I couldn't imagine not having a career, a notion both parents encouraged. As a teenage waitress at Steinhart Lodge, I served numerous luncheons to upper-middle-class women who spent their afternoons playing bridge. The endless card playing seemed like such a waste of talent that I resolved to avoid a similar fate at all costs. In contrast I watched my mother continue to paint and create a remedial reading class at school.

Like all my relatives, I headed to the University of Nebraska for college, the only school I even applied to. Years later an Omaha lawyer asked if I felt deprived because I hadn't gone to an Ivy League school like her children. Excuse me? For us NU was the big time, and we felt lucky to study there because many families didn't "waste" their money educating girls, even at nearby Peru State College. At the university I loved my honors history class so much that I told my parents that I wanted to major in history, not journalism, but my father set me straight. Females who majored in history ended up in the typing pool but a journalism degree could lead to a decent job, so he ordered me to take a journalism course.

NU's journalism school was strong, but my job on our student paper, the *Daily Nebraskan*, turned me into a journalist for life. I adored not only the work but the brilliant, hilarious people who hung out at the paper and yearbook offices. For the first time in my life, I belonged! We lived in almost total sexual equality. Women supervised men as readily as the reverse, and the guys had no use for women who hid their smarts. It was fun to be a student journalist in the mid-1960s because we questioned authority and the outmoded rules that restricted women, and we were optimistic that authorities would see the light and change.

Like many female veterans of student media, I later wanted to re-create the best experience of my life by becoming a full partner on the newsroom team.

After graduating in 1968 with double majors in journalism and political science and minors in history and English, I accepted an assistantship in political science at the University of Minnesota, hoping that a master's degree would help me get a job covering politics or social issues. When I reached the Minnesota campus, I discovered to my surprise that this was the first year that the political science department had not penalized female applicants for their sex. Who would ever have guessed that women had been so unfairly penalized? The faculty had feared that women would drop out of school to get married, wasting a precious opportunity. They were proud of themselves for dropping this sexist restriction, but graduate school gave me my first taste of being a test case for my gender. I did the coursework for the MA and started hunting for a reporting job in Nebraska or Iowa in the spring of 1969.

The timing was good because the economy was booming, and men were being drafted for the Vietnam War. I detested the war, so I did not rejoice in the circumstance even though I benefited from it. Major newspapers were opening city news jobs to women for the first time, and I had my choice of three offers. I took the one at the *World-Herald* because it was closest to home, and I became one of the newspaper's first three or four modern women in city news. Almost immediately I was assigned the church beat, while newly hired men either spent several months on general assignment or the police beat. I was pleased with the assignment because I was interested in religion and saw it as an opportunity to enterprise. It didn't occur to me until later that I had been treated differently than the guys.

As I look back on my eleven years at the paper, my gratitude for what I learned outweighs any complaints about sexism, such as being asked about my possible marriage plans during the in-

terview process. I quickly discarded my inflated notions of my competence. It was painfully obvious how much I had to learn, and having so few women colleagues to commiserate with made this process more difficult. Fortunately Mary McGrath became a combination of mentor and guardian angel, and I owe surviving that first year to her. If a few of the men resented the opening of city news to women, the majority welcomed anyone who was competent and hardworking regardless of sex. Fred Thomas, David Thompson, Jim Clemon, and others went out of their way to be helpful. They along with people like Mary, Bob Dorr, Steve Jordon, and Mike Kelly were a newsroom team that I was proud to be part of. I loved the newsroom's energy and its humor even if some of it would have struck an outsider as dark, off color, or sexist because this humor was our survival mechanism and a badge of belonging.

My religion beat thrust me into covering the social action work in which many religious groups were involved in that era, especially in North Omaha's African American neighborhoods. Covering African American churches entailed writing about their fight for economic empowerment and their protests against racism. At some point local women's groups started speaking out about sex discrimination, and I began routinely covering stories that the guys either did not hear about or did not perceive as newsworthy. Since I was already covering a beat that included many stories about social issues and discrimination, adding women's problems to the list required no special permission. All I had to do was suggest specific stories. The more I wrote about topics such as credit discrimination against women or the lack of a Girls Club comparable to Omaha's outstanding Boys Clubs, the more tips I got and the more my editors welcomed such coverage. As an added bonus, just airing issues could often lead to important changes for women. The stories of Connie Claussen, the University of Nebraska at Omaha's women's athletic director who also taught and coached, and Doris Royal, a farmer from

Sarpy County, illustrate the role that journalism played in correcting blatant injustice based on sex.

Claussen, whom I had met through covering the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women, called in 1973 to say that she was resigning as women's athletic director at UNO and would merely teach physical education courses. She would no longer coach for free while men were paid. She also complained about teaching in a Quonset hut that lacked showers, while the men's facilities were far nicer. *Great story*, thought I: credible source at a major institution refusing to tolerate discrimination any longer. However, since it was a sports story, I offered it to the UNO beat reporter in Sports. He vehemently rejected the idea, almost yelling that women's sports were not newsworthy. I told the city desk that I wanted to write the piece. After it ran on the front page of the Sunday paper, UNO addressed Claussen's complaints. She built outstanding women's sports programs, and the university replaced the Quonset hut with a new physical education building.

When Doris Royal called, her first question was: "Are you interested in stories about women?" Then she told me something that astounded me despite my farm background. Federal inheritance-tax laws were forcing widows off their farms because the IRS maintained that husbands owned the land and farm earnings. Widows had to pay inheritance taxes that many could not afford on their own homes. Farm wives could escape taxes by demonstrating that they had helped buy the farm through an outside salary or a family inheritance, but farm work didn't count because the IRS did not document it. Royal wanted a story on her petition drive to change this injustice. After I investigated and learned that Royal's facts were correct, I wrote a story that someone passed on to the *Farm Journal*. I learned later that the *Farm Journal* then launched a national petition drive that was instrumental in changing the law. But the law change began with Royal's petition and the coverage that the Omaha media gave it.

At times I crossed the line between objective reporting and advocacy for women, a common problem among female reporters covering women's issues in this era. When the Nebraska legislature held a hearing on repealing our ratification of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, I took the day off to see my mother testify against repeal. I asked hostile questions of ERA opponent Phyllis Schlafly and struggled to be fair to local anti-ERA forces.

But such hot-button issues were the exception. Mostly I wrote about problems facing women that would otherwise have been overlooked. For example, I covered the struggle to open a spouse abuse shelter that prominent women demanded and many men felt was unnecessary. The executive director of Catholic Charities, which United Way had assigned to run the new program, called me the day after the shelter opened, distraught because he had not believed it was needed yet it filled immediately. By noon of the first day there was a waiting list, and the agency immediately began planning a second facility. The case reminded me that many men simply needed to be educated about the problems of women, and it made me determined to keep writing stories that informed them.

Most of my news sources did not care who covered them as long as the stories were accurate, but most police and many politicians were overtly sexist. The police disliked all reporters, but they especially loved tormenting women like me who substituted on weekends. Crude jokes tested if women would get upset, and many officers made clarifying confusing information on police reports more difficult than necessary just to see if the reporter would get rattled. I'm sure this has changed now that women routinely cover police and many top officers are women. When I finally got a chance to cover politics by assisting Don Pieper at the state legislature, I fielded comments about how kind the newspaper was to send him such an attractive "consort" and so on. I informed one state senator who had complained about be-

ing interviewed by the church editor that I had a master's degree in political science from the University of Minnesota; that shut him up. Such comments were a small price to pay for attending Don's ongoing informal seminar in state government, the best graduate education I ever received in this field. Along the way I also learned to avoid wearing miniskirts around politicians who had been drinking.

During my first years at the paper, I felt that everything I did could either help or hurt opportunities for other women because managers still seemed to regard women reporters as an experiment. We had to be as tough as the guys in a tough field and yet remain feminine. Crying was, of course, forbidden as was turning down any assignment, but baking brownies and bantering about baseball won allies. I took foolish risks such as walking to my car alone after covering night assignments to avoid appearing weak. The sensible precaution of asking for an escort after dark did not occur to me, and I would have rejected it if it had. Dumb — and dangerous!

I waged two ongoing battles during those early years because I felt a duty to speak out for women. The first concerned sexism in the news columns and headlines, those casual, cute putdowns of women that weren't meant to offend but did. I retreated readily when my objections were not well received because I didn't want to alienate the guys; mostly they just needed a pleasant reminder that standards had changed. The second dealt with the reluctance of the paper to assign women to hard news beats and to open Sports to them. I didn't want to cover sports, cops, or city hall but felt that women should have the opportunity if they wanted it. After three years I also wanted a new beat because my male peers had all changed assignments at least once during the period. It seemed that there were different policies for women and men. My two causes came together in an incident that endeared assistant city editor Alfred "Bud" Pagel to me forever.

I glanced at the front page of the paper one day when Bud was

on the city desk and noticed that the lead on the weather story said that just like a woman, Mother Nature had thrown a fit then stomped out. When I chided Bud for failing to change the sexist language, he told me I was being overly sensitive. I dropped the subject, but the next morning Pagel resumed our conversation. “You know that weather lead you didn’t like,” he said. “Yes,” I replied. “Well maybe you were right. When I got home, the first thing Annie [his wife] said to me was, ‘Ew, Bud, how did you let that get in the paper?’” Then instead of heading back to the city desk, Pagel asked, “Do you ever feel you’re treated differently because you are a woman?” Was I hearing this correctly? I wondered. “I don’t think a man with a master’s degree in political science who has worked as hard as I have would be unable to get off the church beat after three years.” Bud responded, “You’ve got a point. Let’s talk about it after work tomorrow night.”

Over drinks at the Omaha Press Club, Pagel and I discussed women’s opportunities compared with those of men of equal ability and experience. Pagel said my work merited a change of assignments, and as we left, he promised, “On Monday you’ll have a new beat.” On Monday I became the full-time human services reporter covering housing, welfare, nonprofit agencies, services to young and old people, abuse of people by bureaucrats, and other such topics. I have remained forever grateful to Bud and to the other men who helped women become a routine part of our news operation — the primary goal of us groundbreakers. No lawsuit could have done as much for me or for women as a heartfelt talk with a colleague whom I highly esteemed. Thanks, Bud!

Simultaneously the *World-Herald* began hiring more women in city news, including Eve Goodwin, our first African American, and good women journalists were breaking into Omaha TV news. Our hard work paid off as we became increasingly integrated into all aspects of news. The young women (and men) in all forms of Omaha media became friends covering assignments together and socializing at Omaha Press Club events, a cross-

media alliance that was especially helpful to women in sorting out common problems. We even did daring things like petition the press club to drop its partnership with another private club that banned women from the dining room; numerous men signed our protest. Together we created a new norm in local news that within a few years made the presence of women in all our newsrooms routine. However, we did it so quietly that even our colleagues did not realize what we had changed and accomplished. By 1977 when the *World-Herald* sent me to Houston to cover the big National Women's Year Conference, the assignment was almost something I had expected even given the rarity of covering anything outside Nebraska. By then my editors realized that the issues being discussed were of great interest to most readers regardless of their views on topics such as the ERA. In fact most members of the Nebraska delegation opposed it, but our readers obviously followed my coverage and I even got the only bonus of my reporting career for my work there.

I left the *World-Herald* for a PR job at Union Pacific Railroad in 1980, the first woman in PR at this predominantly male company. Years later I earned a doctorate in political science (built on that early master's) and became the first female chair of Creighton University's journalism department.

In hindsight I feel fortunate to have come of age when I did and honored to have helped open modern Omaha journalism to women. I could never have enjoyed the career I have had without the support of male as well as female mentors and colleagues, and I am grateful to all of them. For years I thought that we baby boomers were the groundbreaking women in journalism in Nebraska. How wrong I was. As the rest of this book reveals, we were just another link in a chain of remarkable women. I hope that compiling their stories casts new light not only on those in Nebraska journalism but also on the lives of women in many fields throughout the country.