You wonder how Muriel Dobbin, a national writer in McClatchy’s Washington Bureau, would craft her own profile if given the assignment on the eve of her retirement at the end of the year. This is a journalist, after all, who has profiled the most important figures in modern American politics – from Jacqueline Kennedy to George W. Bush. This is a reporter who, over much of her 55-year newspaper career, has held a front-row ticket to American history, covering events and issues that include the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War and the Iraq war, Watergate and Monica Lewinsky.

Her own story does not lack for color and quirks – elements for which her profiles and writing are renowned. Dobbin became an unwitting journalism pioneer in the early 1960s when, as an experiment, The Baltimore Sun sent her to Washington as the first female member of its prestigious Washington bureau. The bureau was staffed by 15 men when she arrived and she joined an early group of women allowed into the hallowed ranks of the Washington press corps.

“In those days there were almost no women reporters. I mean none,” said Dobbin. “Women wrote features or they worked on the society section.”

She was sent to Washington in 1963 to cover Jacqueline Kennedy, but shortly after her arrival found herself covering John F. Kennedy’s funeral. She was moved to the White House beat and became one of two Baltimore Sun reporters covering Lyndon B. Johnson.

It was an unlikely ascension given Dobbin’s background. Her newspaper experience prior to The Sun consisted of a seven-year stay at the weekly Ayrshire Post in her native Scotland where she went to work at 17. Dobbin joined the White House press corps without a driver’s license, without U.S. citizenship, without a college education and without any experience covering American government or much knowledge of American politics.

“The paper said they wanted a fresh approach, but what they got was ignorance,” said Dobbin, her Scottish accent still strong. “I mean I was so green I didn’t really have much idea of what I was doing.”

Dobbin learned on the job as some of the biggest stories in American history unfolded. She credits her survival on the training she received as a police and courts reporter at the weekly newspaper in Scotland, the guidance of legendary Baltimore Sun Bureau Chief Philip Potter and the benevolence of fellow members of the White House press corps.

“I was very fortunate that the other male correspondents were very, very kind to me,” said Dobbin. “David Broder helped teach me American politics as did Tom Wicker.”

There were some growing pains along the way such as Dobbin’s first White House trip to Johnson’s Texas ranch. Johnson took Dobbin and another female reporter on a private, frightening, high-speed tour of the ranch. Dobbin blabbed about it afterward to her fellow correspondents and was chastised to discover that her tale had made it into papers across the country.

“There I am at a (White House) Rose Garden ceremony and Johnson walks right through the crowd to me,” said Dobbin. “He was a very large man, a very tall man. I’ll never forget it. He leaned over and said, ‘You betrayed me.’ ‘No I didn’t.’ ‘Yes you did.’

“Here I am with a green card and I’m arguing with the president of the United States who could deport me,” she said. “The White House press corps thought it was hysterically funny. I didn’t think it was funny at all. I thought I was in very serious trouble. I mean you don’t take on the president of the United States.”

Over her career, Dobbin has covered many presidents since though Johnson remains her favorite presidential subject.

“You got to know Johnson. He didn’t like to be alone so he would invite the reporters in,” she said. “I don’t know any other president who made himself so available.”

Her favorite political story was Watergate. Dobbin covered the Watergate trial in its entirety in 1974 and 1975.

“It was like going to the theater every day,” she said. “It was the most dramatic time I think I’ve ever seen in this country because we were dealing with the toppling of a president.”

Muriel Dobbin retires in 2004 after a pioneering, 55-year newspaper career.
Muriel Dobbin reflects on her career at the National Press Club in Washington.

Dobbin spent 14 years in The Sun’s Washington Bureau and reflects fondly on those times. It was a colorful period, she said, when reporters and politicians had more trust in one another. Her colleagues of the day worked hard, played hard and drank harder.

“It was great fun when I was there,” said Dobbin. “There were a lot of characters there in the old days. The Baltimore Sun was kind of an Aunt Jane paper and there were a bunch of hell-raisers working for it and it was kind of fun.”

Dobbin moved to San Francisco when The Sun’s one-person West Coast bureau became vacant in 1976. She spent 10 years there covering 12 states and western Canada – still without ever learning how to drive. She wrote all kinds of stories, including the offbeat, funny and quirky stories favored by The Sun and for which her British journalism background was well suited.

Dobbin’s own offbeat imagination led her to publish four books of fiction, including one, A Taste for Power, about vampires running for president.

Dobbin was married to the late Ted Sell, founding editor of the old McClatchy News Service and assistant to the late C.K. McClatchy, editor and chairman of McClatchy. When Sell died in 1989, Dobbin looked to return to Washington and did so in 1990 as a national writer in McClatchy’s Washington Bureau.

She represented McClatchy as a member of the Grillroom Club. In 1997, she became just the second female president of the prestigious group of Washington journalists, which exists to put on an annual roast of politicos.

“Muriel knows how to report a story – to get the facts right and talk to the right sources,” said Rennert, “and she uses that raw material in a beautiful, readable, compelling way.”

David Westphal, McClatchy’s current bureau chief, said Dobbin has never lost her zest for reporting, a fact backed up by Dobbin’s work during the just-concluded presidential campaign. Her profiles of the likes of Dick Cheney, Laura Bush and Teresa Heinz Kerry received prominent play in McClatchy papers.

“She’s a very classy gran dam of journalism and certainly of our bureau,” said Westphal.

Dobbin walks away from newspapering with much satisfaction in her career, an appreciation for her 14 years with McClatchy, and without any regrets.

“I’ve been privileged that I’ve watched history,” said Dobbin. “I’ve really seen things happen in this country.”

— Peter Tira