

Witness to History

Muriel Dobbin retires in 2004 after a pioneering, 55-year newspaper career.

Photograph by Ryan K. Morris

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 were unfolding. 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 chagrined 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 reflects on her career at the National Press Club in Washington.

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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 Gridiron 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 politicians.

“Muriel is a crackerjack reporter in every sense,” said Leo Rennert, the former McClatchy Washington Bureau chief who helped hire Dobbin and teamed up with her on White House coverage.

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

– Peter Tira

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

Who’s Who ... continued

St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He spent another 16 years working for the *Philadelphia Bulletin’s* Washington Bureau, 10 of those years as bureau chief. O’Rourke earned an undergraduate degree from Villanova University and a law degree from Georgetown University. He is a practicing attorney who does pro bono legal work in his off hours. He plans to devote more attention to his law practice when he retires from McClatchy.



» **James Rosen** is a national writer specializing in Iraq and national security issues. Rosen arrived in Washington in 1994 as a correspondent for *The News & Observer* in Raleigh. He joined McClatchy’s Washington Bureau in 1995 with the company’s purchase of *The News & Observer* that year and became a national correspondent in 2001. Rosen is a native of Detroit. Over the course of his career, he has worked as a city editor for *The News & Observer*, a general assignment reporter for the *New York Daily News*, and a Moscow correspondent for United Press International. He holds an undergraduate degree in political science and Russian from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University. Said Rosen: “I think I’m paid to be on the front pages of our papers.”



» **Liz Ruskin** is the regional correspondent for the *Anchorage Daily News* and covers issues that include the debate over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and logging in the Tongass National Forest. She joined the Washington bureau in 2001, moving from the *Anchorage Daily News* where she had worked as a reporter since 1992. She was born in Anchorage and is a second-generation *Anchorage Daily News* reporter – her mother worked there as a features writer. Ruskin is on leave from the Washington bureau. She is spending the 2004-05 academic year as a Ted Scripps Fellow at the Center for Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Ruskin holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Washington and a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Missouri.

» As McClatchy’s Washington Bureau chief, **David Westphal** oversees a total of 15 employees, including three national writers, eight regional reporters, two news editors, an office manager and an intern. In addition to his management responsibilities, Westphal also keeps tabs on the White House, contributing stories on the president. Westphal joined the bureau in 1995 as deputy bureau chief and was named bureau chief in 1998, succeeding Leo Rennert. Before joining McClatchy, Westphal spent 17 years at the *Des Moines Register*, including his last seven years there as managing editor. He is a native of Iowa and a graduate of Wartburg College. He enjoys running and expects to be a regular at the games of Washington’s new baseball team. Westphal is married to Geneva Overholser, a former editor of the *Des Moines Register*, ombudsman of the *Washington Post* and editorial board member of *The New York Times*.



» **David Whitney** is the longest-serving member in the McClatchy Washington Bureau. He started work there in 1986 after 13 years with *The Oregonian* in both Portland and Washington, D.C. He has worked as a correspondent for four McClatchy papers during his tenure – *The Sacramento Bee* since 2001 and previously the *Anchorage Daily News*, *The News Tribune* and the *Tri-City Herald*. He is a Sacramento Valley native, born and raised in Chico. He holds a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in English literature from California State University, Chico.



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