

*Chronicles*

# Journalists Ahead of Their Time

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Shortly after Lyndon Johnson became president, he was asked to speak at a Women's National Press Club awards dinner. As he sat down, he turned to club President Elsie Carper and asked, "Is this the time to announce I'm appointing 10 women to important positions?"

She urged him on, of course. Ms. Carper told the *Chronicle* that the news sent the women reporters dashing for the telephone. "It certainly put the Women's National Press Club in the public eye," she said.

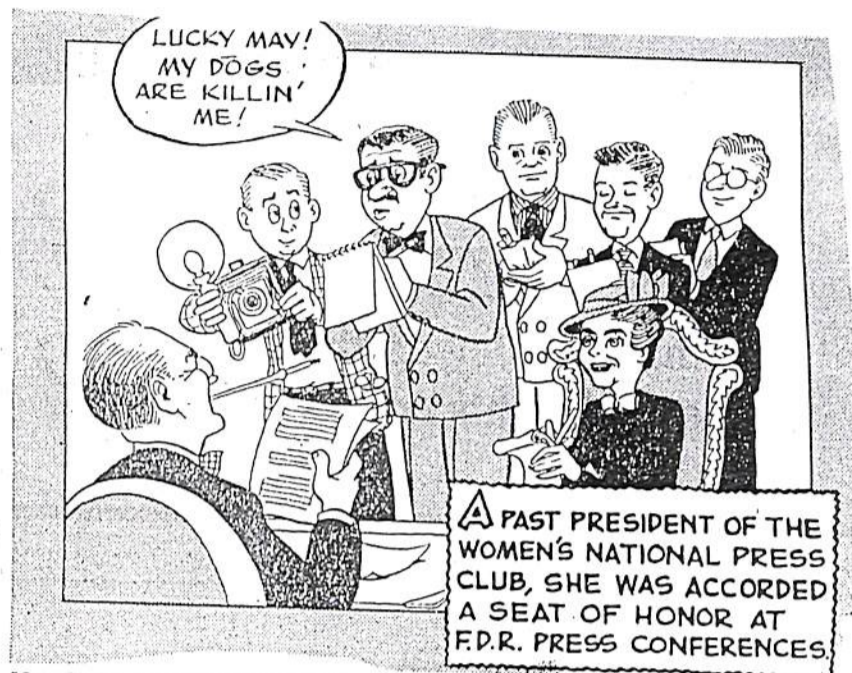
Last week the Library of Congress acknowledged the club's founding in September 1919 and the adoption of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote, with a new exhibit titled "Women Come to the Front." Using mostly photographs, it tells about eight journalists, photographers and broadcasters who earned their chance at fame in World War II.

Wanting to know more, the *Chronicle* consulted Ms. Carper, who was for many years a Washington Post reporter and assistant managing editor. She and Frances Lewine, another former WNPC president and now a CNN producer, have written a paper on the club's history. It was founded, Ms. Carper said, because the National Press Club and the Gridiron Club, organized by men at the turn of the century, would not admit women to the clubs' newsmaker events.

In 1919, when the Prince of Wales came to town, women journalists decided to do something about it and founded their own club.

After that, Cora Rigby, a reporter with the Washington Bureau of the *Christian Science Monitor*, helped organize the Women's National Press Club. The first six founders with Rigby were Elizabeth King of the *New York Post*, Carolyn Vance Bell of the *Enterprise Association*, and suffragists Alice Gram Robinson, Florence Brewer Boeckel and Eleanor Taylor Nelson. They aimed to combat "the conspiracy of men to keep women off the newspapers, or at least to reduce their number, wages and importance."

On Jan. 15, 1971, the club changed its name to the Washington Press Club and admitted men. Three days later, after almost three-quarters of a century, Ms. Carper said, the National Press



May Craig, in a circa 1950 cartoon on view at the Library of Congress.

Club admitted women for the first time. And in April 1985, the two clubs merged.

It's likely that Eleanor Roosevelt deserves as much credit as any and more than most for encouraging women journalists. Mrs. Roosevelt, herself a newspaper columnist, gave women a decisive boost when she announced firmly that she planned to hold weekly press conferences—and only women would be admitted, author Hope Ridings Miller told the *Chronicle*.

Mrs. Miller was the 1938 president of the WNPC, and the Washington Post reporter covering Mrs. Roosevelt's conferences. "She also had us to the White House on the nights of the all-male journalists' Gridiron Club—we called our dinner the 'Widiron.'"

The "Women Come to the Front" exhibit "opens a window on a generation of women who secured a place for themselves in the workplace, the newsroom, and on the battlefield," said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington.

Among them is May Craig (1889-1975), who covered Washington for the Gannett newspapers, was a leader in the Women's National Press Club and attended Mrs. Roosevelt's press conferences. The reporter was, as well, a target of many cartoons, which are displayed in the exhibit. She covered the Normandy campaign and the liberation of Paris. But she still complained, a caption quotes, that the word "facilities" would be engraved on her heart when she died, because it has "so often been used to prevent me from doing what men reporters could do."

Only two of the eight women in the show are still alive, and both attended the exhibit opening. Marvin Breckinridge Patterson, CBS's first female staff broadcaster in Europe and a Washington philanthropist, was the first to photograph and broadcast from the London bomb shelters during the war. Mrs. Patterson, who celebrates

her 90th birthday today, slipped up her sleeve to show her identification bracelet. "I had it engraved with the address of CBS so, if we were hit, they'd know where to send the body. I never thought I and my papers would end up here."

Esther Bublely of New York City, now 74, looked as though she would prefer to see the evening through a camera lens. She said she was saved from a job copying photographs at the National Archives by Roy Stryker, a legendary mentor from the Farm Security Administration historical section. He liked her pictures of Washington war workers.

So Bublely photographed the home front for the Office of War Information—pictures of women workers, sitting on the steps, waiting to use the shower in their boarding house; lines forming at shoe stores on the day coupons expired; people at bus stops headed to war, to work. Since then, her photographs have appeared in *Life* and other magazines.

Women journalists have been around Washington since Margaret Bayard Smith arrived in 1800 with her husband, Samuel Harrison Smith, to establish the first national newspaper in the United States, the *National Intelligencer*. For a long while, though, women were few in number and usually restricted to writing gossip and society news. Their story has yet to be fully told, researched, exhibited or much more than chatted about. Lewine and Ms. Carper have made a start on a history of the Women's National Press Club, and the Library of Congress exhibit is a beginning. We would like to see more.

Beverly Brannan, the library's photograph curator, suggested the exhibit. Martha Hopkins directed it. The exhibit will be open 8:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays and 8:30-6 p.m. Saturdays through Dec 6.