

BFFWomenJournalists-VI: Inspired by the words of award-winning journalist and popular television host Christiane Amanpour, on November 1, 2018, who spoke of how the free press is, “the BFF of the people and not the enemy of the people.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd0Blxbgpuw>, prompted me to suggest she author a book expanding her friendly rhetoric to a larger audience. Awaiting Ms. Amanpour’s book, I wrote my November, 2018 column recalling historic women journalists from previous columns, to support them, their profession and the free press. It has turned into a series of which this is my sixth column.

Sarah McClendon (1910-2003) a Washington reporter who covered presidential politics for half-century, was best known for asking sharp, blunt questions at presidential press conferences. She knew eleven presidents from FDR to Bill Clinton, and had good working relationships with all but Lyndon Johnson who once commented, "I can run the country or take questions from Sarah McClendon, but not both."



Born and raised in Tyler, Texas, McClendon graduated from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism in 1931 and credits her experience at MU for making her a true reporter. There she learned the standards of journalism, how to cover a story, and how to always get the story. “That’s one of the things I learned, always get the story and figure out a way to get as much of it in the paper as you possibly could, despite. . .opposition.”

Upon earning her degree, McClendon worked for the *Tyler Morning Telegraph* and the *Tyler Courier-Times* for eight years covering local politics and federal courts, while facing gender discrimination having to prove herself to be a “true news” reporter not just a “society page” reporter. She recalled several instances being told: “We have to cut back the budget. We don’t have a society editor. Sarah, you have to go back and be the society editor.” or, “We have a new budget. We’re going to give you a raise. But we can’t give you a raise because this man’s wife is going to have a baby.” or “This man has to come a long distance to work, so he’s got to buy a new car. We have to give him a raise.”

Tyler was a boomtown during the Great Depression with an abundance of news stories due to the abundance of oil and natural gas in the region. Her investigative articles about the local iron ore industry brought a warning from her editor not to write any more on it. But when a new angle she wanted to get in the paper developed and her editor could not be located, she took the initiative (risk?) and published. Immediately fired by her editor, allowed her to be hired at the Texas *Beaumont Enterprise*.

McClendon enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in September 1942, initially serving in the public relations department. She attended Officer Candidate School, was promoted to lieutenant where she served as a public relations officer in the Army Surgeon General's office, a job she loved. But a brief marriage resulted in her pregnancy, and her pregnancy resulted in an honorable discharge. Aware of her medical rights as an officer, she was the first to give birth at a military hospital in June 1944. That same month, this single mom with a newborn daughter started a job as a Washington correspondent.

She immediately earned a White House press pass and covered the final months of FDR's life. But when male reporters returned after the war, and she once again became unemployed, she resolved never again. She founded the McClendon News Service in 1946 and represented more than a dozen small Texas newspapers during the remainder of her journalism career and established a reputation for tenacious reporting.

As one of only five women correspondents in Washington, DC, she organized a press briefing group for these five women reporters and became a model for press women as a single working-mother in the post-WWII male newspaper business era.

McClendon went on to serve on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, the Veterans Administration Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, and in various positions in the National Woman's Party. In 1963, she used her position to argue for women's membership in the National Press Club. She didn't receive membership until January 1, 1971, but she did receive it.

In 1977, she became an associate of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, an American nonprofit publishing organization which works to increase communication between women and to connect the public with forms of women-based media.

McClendon confessed that as a novice reporter not willing to show it, she did not ask FDR any questions. She was rather scared of him, noting he was much of a dictator and always right. But after FDR, she became one of the most outspoken reporters in the White House press briefing room. She believed citizens have the right to know what their government is doing.

Her blunt, straightforward questioning came from her abhorrence with the answers, answers that were not direct and didn't answer reporters' questions. She vowed her questions would aim to get direct answers and is best known for posing sharp questions at U.S. presidents.

With her flaming red hair and her scratchy voice, she embarrassed reporters as well as presidents by often asking unwelcome questions about veterans' benefits or women's rights or presidential priorities. As the only woman reporter attending President Dwight Eisenhower's first news conference, she was sent to the balcony and told that questions were not encouraged.

From her balcony position, McClendon hollered at a startled Eisenhower to ask if this was how future news conferences were to be conducted. Eisenhower eventually changed

the format. She would arrive early assuring a seat in the front row, and made it a point to ask a question at every news conference.

In a 1988 interview, she declared, “The press represents the people. We are the government’s representatives looking at government. And by golly if we weren’t doing it, it would be a hell of a lot worse than it is.” But McClendon also lamented the modern press’s focus on international affairs in Libya, about Iran Contra, etc., instead of domestic issues such as homelessness, high health care cost, poverty or children in poverty.

She once defined a reporter as: “one who feels an obligation to the public interest to study, research, investigate, and reveal facts about government and life. One who accompanies reporting skills with a sense of responsibility to society and the community around him or her, and now the world. One who seeks to defend the downtrodden and to expose the special interests, the special privileges that permit personal enrichment, the special practices permitted in big business ostensibly for profits of society but which in the long run build only more wealth and special comforts for the very few at the expense of the many.”

Late in her career, McClendon simultaneously authored a weekly syndicated newspaper column, a biweekly newsletter, and presided over a weekly radio commentary airing on 1,200 stations across the country. She also published two autobiographies: *My Eight Presidents* (1978), and *Mr. President, Mr. President: My 50 Years of Covering the White House* (1996).



Sarah McClendon was working on a newsletter article shortly before her death in Washington, DC, on January 9, 2003, at the age of 92. That day, former President Clinton issued a statement saying, "I hope St. Peter is prepared for the kinds of questions that nearly a dozen presidents had to face."

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