

# A CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION

By WILLIAM McKEEN



It was an inopportune moment to begin a conversation. I had a beer balancing on a paper plate full of potato chips, a tape recorder cradled under one arm, and my mouth stuffed with a roast beef sandwich. I was gobbling down the free food in the press lounge at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, and before me stood another media type, all teeth, saying hello, asking who I was working for.

"Well, (swallow), it's kind of (gulp) confusing. I'm really with the University of Oklahoma."

"Oh really? I'm from Stanford. I'm just stringing for—" and here he expectorated a series of letters I took to be the signature of a radio or TV station. "Who are you stringing for?"

"I'm not *really* stringing," I said. "This is my class."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I brought five students along, and we're covering the convention for Oklahoma newspapers. And I'm going to grade the poor souls."

"Wow," said the Stanford prof. "I wish I would have thought of that."

Indeed. But it was Ralph Sewell, OU professor emeritus of journalism, who thought of it. For years he took groups of advanced reporting students to the conventions for the experience of a 20-year-old lifetime. I had understudied Ralph in his Capitol News Bureau project (OU students covering the legislature for state newspapers), so I drew the assignment to take the students to the conventions last summer. Ralph came along just to show me the ropes in San Francisco, and I was on my own with the Republicans in Dallas.

The class was "on the books" for the summer session, even though the Dal-

las convention came two weeks after summer classes had ended, and the students were obligated to work through election night. I would wager the students put more work into their week at the convention than most students put into a traditional semester-long course.

I remember one night in Dallas, taking a delegate notebook to the hotel room of Kim Alyce Marks, a McAlester graduate student. I could hear typing as I slid the notebook under the door. I checked my watch — it was 4 a.m. She was up at 8 to dictate her story to *The Daily Oklahoman*.

Though a convention novice myself, I wasn't naive. I had told the students to expect little sleep during their week on duty. In San Francisco we averaged three hours a night. After the evening's session ended, the Democrats would make the rounds of a series of



*Somewhere in this mass of Republicans, five OU student reporters, their harried professor and an OSU colleague jostle with other accredited members of the media for the Dallas convention stories destined for Oklahoma newspapers statewide.*

parties, and it was there that the students did some of their best interviewing. (It wasn't all play and no work at those parties.) They would retire in the wee hours and have to awake around 6 to file stories to Oklahoma, where the business day would be beginning.

The fact that the Dallas convention was in Oklahoma's time zone didn't seem to have much of an impact on the sleep patterns. The hours were just as long, perhaps because we had been commissioned by the Oklahoma City bureau of the Associated Press to write state-oriented features on the convention. The students worked long and hard to produce six or seven stories a day for the AP, *The Oklahoma Daily*, and other newspapers with whom they had contracted.

The students were fully accredited members of the press, thanks to several state newspapers — *The Clinton Daily News*, *The Duncan Banner*, *The El Reno Daily Tribune*, *The Elk City Daily News* and *The McCurtain Gazette*. (I was accredited by *The Norman Transcript*, WKY and KGOU.)

The stories were distributed by the Oklahoma Press Association to all member newspapers.

It goes without saying that the students' work was superior. And they worked very hard.

But I cannot tell a lie. We had a lot of fun, too.

In San Francisco we rode the cable cars, ate in Chinatown and shopped in Ghirardelli Square. After the convention one night, Willie Brown, speaker of the California Assembly, had a party on Fisherman's Wharf for several thousand of his closest friends — Warren Beatty, Ted Kennedy, Ed Bradley and us. To be fair, anyone wearing press credentials was admitted to the party, but we still felt somewhat smug to be there. The party reportedly cost \$250,000 to produce and was a re-creation of San Francisco that filled two piers on the wharf. While the students danced to the Greg Kihn Band, I continued to field questions from the curious about why the University of Oklahoma had sent its own delegation to the convention.

In Dallas, many of the parties weren't open to the press. There was one toasty balcony reception at The Mansion on Turtle Creek that was plush, but some of the guests had to leave early, feeling faint. The first day of the Republican convention, the temperature reached 106 degrees.

But a lot of the fun had to do with celebrity-watching. Students would literally bump into the famous and the mega-famous in the crammed convention catacombs. It was a challenge, but the students did a pretty good job of maintaining their journalistic cool. All the major media heavies were in attendance. ("Media heavy" is a term used to describe big-time political journalists in Timothy Crouse's book, *The Boys on the Bus*, which many of the students had read in my journalism history course.) These students, who are all pretty serious about careers in journalism, were a little awed by some of the greats: *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee sat near our group when Walter Mondale made his acceptance speech; Ed

Bradley of "60 Minutes" ran into a couple of the males of our group outside the famous Condor Club in North Beach; and, on our first afternoon in San Francisco, we saw Bill Moyers, Roger Mudd and *Baltimore Sun* political writer Jules Witcover all in one block.

*Jules Witcover?* Print journalists, of course, are not as well known as the talking heads on our television screens. But Witcover was one of the *Boys on the Bus* and was a bonafide folk hero to some of us.

There were other sorts of celebrities, too. Warren Beatty was a delegate from California; alas, none of the students reported a sighting. But Robert Walden, the actor who played rabid reporter Joe Rossi on the "Lou Grant" TV series was seen. He wasn't a delegate, and we didn't know what he was doing on the convention floor, but he was there.

While pushing through the crowd on the floor of the Democratic Convention, Midwest City senior Ruth Baxter and I found ourselves stuck in a mob. I felt a hand on my back, and a voice said, "Excuse me." I turned and saw that it was John F. Kennedy Jr. I pointed him out to Ruth, and she was credited with perhaps the best "sighting" of the San Francisco trip.

The best sighting in Dallas was of Dan Rather escorting Nancy Reagan from the CBS News anchor booth after a mid-afternoon taping session. There was a lot of oohing and ahing — even from the press — though it was difficult to decide whether the reaction was for Rather or Mrs. Reagan.

Rather and the other gods of TV journalism may have witnessed the political pandemonium from perches high above the convention floor, but the students worked at assigned desks in the press section adjacent to the speaker's platform. They were side by side with the media heavies and lightweights, and they saw what convention coverage was like. And they saw how difficult it was to come up with a story markedly different from a colleague's.

We were in a somewhat different situation, since we were writing features about the Oklahoma delegations, but the reporters with whom we worked seemed to turn out nearly identical stories. It was a fulfillment

**"The students worked at assigned desks in the press section . . . side by side with the media heavies and lightweights. They saw what convention coverage was like."**



William McKeen

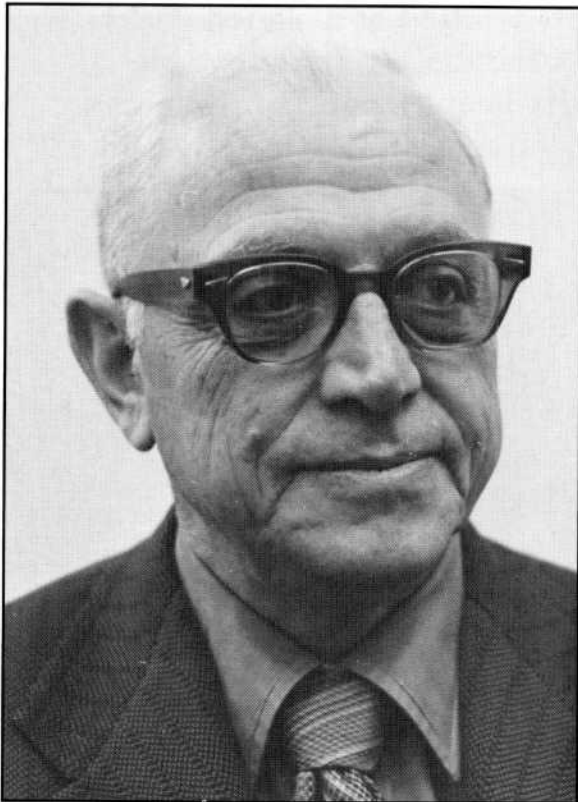
*On the floor of the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, OU's Andy Rubin, left, a junior journalist from New York City, interviews one of Oklahoma's Gary Hart delegates, Lynthia Wesner of Norman.*

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

Jim Argo Oklahoma Publishing Co.

*Midwest City senior Ruth Baxter, left, accredited to the Democratic Convention by the Oklahoma Publishing Company, finds Lynne Stewart of Oklahoma City, right, a Walter Mondale supporter, sitting with the Oklahoma delegation. Seated just behind Baxter is State Representative Mike Lawter, also of Oklahoma City.*



Jim Argo/Oklahoma Publishing Co.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

*The idea and a major portion of the funding for the class in convention reporting came from veteran newsman and OU professor emeritus Ralph Sewell.*

*Ruth Baxter is the first recipient of the Ralph Sewell Scholarship in Political Reporting, established last spring by Sooner alumnus Ray Shaw, president of Dow Jones & Co., Inc.*

of Crouse's *Boys on the Bus*. Why would newspapers go to the expense of sending a reporter to cover the convention when they would write essentially the same story produced by the wire services? Crouse's term for all this is "pack journalism."

The students might have been writing somewhat different stories, but they certainly felt like part of a pack — wolfing down the free meals in the crowded press lounges, standing in long lines to go through the X-ray machines to get in the convention center, milling around on the floor with other reporters in need of a story.

Our "pack" in San Francisco was composed of Baxter; David Dundore, a Tulsa senior; Evan Katz, a Houston junior; Jackie Meeks, a Bartlesville junior; and Andy Rubin, a New York City junior. In addition to Marks, the Dallas group included Sean Hockens, a Bartlesville senior, Kelly Meek, a Norman senior and Burl Spencer, a Tulsa senior. Katz had enjoyed his San Francisco experience so much that he arranged for his own accreditation

(through the *Shawnee News-Star*) and accompanied us to Dallas. In the spirit of detente, we brought along an Oklahoma State University student — Rae Dixon from Oklahoma City.


This undertaking would have been impossible without Sewell, himself a 1942 OU journalism graduate and veteran Oklahoma newsman. Not only had he run the program before, he was responsible for most of the funding for the 1984 trips, with additional private support from C. Joe Holland, a former director of the School of Journalism, and a grant from discretionary funds administered by the present director, Elizabeth Yamashita.

The experience was a good one — an opportunity to take knowledge out of the classroom and see it come to life. The students began to develop a sense of a journalist's place in history, as well as witnessing the political process at work. There was little suspense at the Democratic Convention and none at the Republican. But we were there, in the midst of the political system, and we came away with a greater

sense of its importance.

We were festooned with badges and some of us carried audio gear. The badges proclaimed, in bold black letters, PRESS. We wore those badges with some pride.

The badges also made us easy to spot. Standing outside the Dallas Convention Center, we were approached by a member of Ladies Against Women, a satirical protest group. "Oh," she said. "You must be reporters. You look overworked and sweaty."

Right. Overworked, sweaty and proud of it. 

---

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Assistant Professor William McKeen, a five-year veteran of the Western Kentucky University faculty with two degrees from Indiana University, came to OU's H. H. Herbert School of Journalism and Mass Communication in 1982. He also serves as the school's assistant director of student development and currently is working toward a Ph.D. in higher education administration.*