

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.

So Many Interests, So Little Time

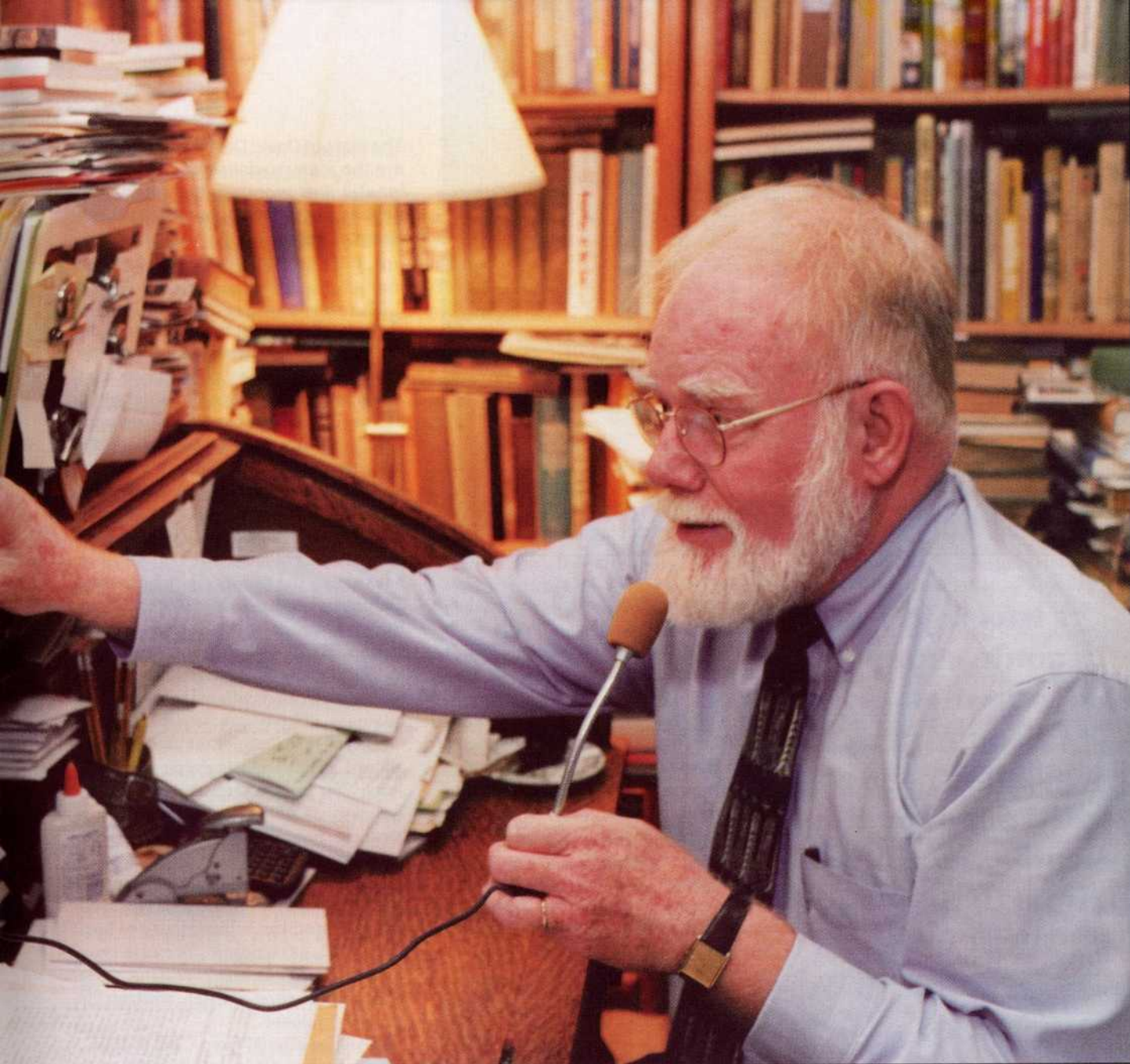
*David Dary takes no prisoners
when chiding professional
colleagues or upgrading the
OU School of Journalism
and Mass Communication.*

BY JENK JONES JR.



ABOVE, left: David Dary, left, interviewed John F. Kennedy just before the young president took office in 1961. Later when Dary was covering the White House for CBS News, Kennedy autographed the photo.

OPPOSITE: David Dary keeps up with news around the world via his ham radio, regularly tuning in the BBC when he craves objectivity.



David Dary lives simultaneously in the present and the past, a duality he intends to follow into the future.

The 64-year-old Dary is director of the H. H. Herbert School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma, which he has rallied from dismal depression to national respectability.

He also is one of the nation's top historians on the Old West. A prolific writer of books, magazine and newspaper articles on pioneers of the prairie, Dary continues to explore the past even as he tackles present-day tasks as an administrator and professor.

His personal record is colorful—and sometimes a bit feisty.

This overgrown leprechaun with beard and Irish red hair to match has clashed with revisionist historians, lazy professors, political correctness, balky college administrators and television's "infusion of showbiz people," who he

says "favor entertainment over information" in newscasts.

"If you're doing what you believe is right, do it" is his warrior's creed.

Through a busy lifetime, he served in Washington as a radio and television reporter and manager for CBS and NBC during most of the 1960s, has been a ham radio operator for 45 years, instructed journalists in the unstable Sudan in Africa, been a television anchor, worked in political campaigns, served as an infantry officer in the Army Reserve, taught at the University of Kansas for two decades, developed sleight of hand and magic skills and become an ardent observer of backyard wildlife.

His cramped study in a south Norman home holds part of the nearly 10,000 volumes he owns—"probably 9,000 on Western history." The ham set is on his crowded desk. Walls where bookshelves do not dominate have pictures of famous people he has covered as a journalist: Lyndon



Robert Taylor

The stars of David Dary's home videos are the many varieties of wildlife that inhabit the wooded creekbed just beyond the back windows of his south Norman home.

“I was told I’d made some enemies. I thought it was about time to hit ’em over the head . . . I did it primarily to wake them up.”

Johnson, John F. and Robert F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Harry Truman, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Hubert Humphrey. House Speaker Sam Rayburn is there, along with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and broadcaster David Brinkley. Several pictures show Dary interviewing leaders.

The house he and wife Sue share exudes a strong Western theme. The spacious living room has Indian-motif rugs, wall hangings and chair covers. Horns of cattle and buffalo line walls. A herd of stuffed cloth buffalo marches along a shelf.

The latter has a link to Dary's work. While in Washington he researched the buffalo, or American bison, at the Library of Congress and found that little had been written on that great beast. So Dary wrote *The Buffalo Book*,

published in 1974, which was a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Natural Science Book Club. It was reprinted in a paperback revised edition in 1989.

An interest in wildlife is evident at the Dary home. The backyard overlooks a wooded creekbed where Sue says they have seen deer, coyote, bobcat, skunk, gray fox, raccoon, squirrel and opossum. Seven birdfeeders have brought 73 recorded species within the Darys' vision, and an outside microphone channels their chirping and song to a speaker indoors. Cookies kept handy inside the back door lure raccoons, whose pawprints are visible on the glass. “They’ll come up and practically knock on the door,” Sue says.

One corner of the living room is not Western. That is where Dary keeps souvenirs of U.S. Information Agency-sponsored trips to the Sudan in 1988 and 1989 to train local journalists. Dary says the hotel he was to use in Khartoum was bombed just before his first stay, and the government fell in a coup two weeks after his second assignment.

Khartoum was where famed British General C. G. “Chinese” Gordon and his army were annihilated in 1885 by Sudanese rebels. “I’ve walked down those steps where his head bounced,” Dary recalls.

His own head, along with those of millions of other Americans, seemed on the line in October 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis.

Dary did the introduction on CBS radio before President Kennedy went on the air to tell Americans that Soviet missiles were in Cuba, targeted at the United States. Dary remembers getting a copy of the speech 20 minutes in advance of JFK's delivery and thinking, “Oh, my God.” He even telephoned Sue and said, “Get a couple of bags packed.” Should they become separated by events, Dary says he told her to take the family (they have four daughters) and meet him later at Front Royal, Virginia, distant from Washington.

“There was a lot of tension (among newsmen),” he recalls. “It was serious business. There was no joking.”

Days later reporter Dary was aboard a Navy plane doing figure-8s some 700 to 800 feet above the sea. Below was the first Russian ship hauling missiles and their threat away from Cuba. The Navy was there to verify the removal.

Despite the Cuban crisis, Dary generally “found the White House to be a very dull assignment because you couldn’t really do any reporting. You primarily were on a watch, waiting for a (press) release.”

Thus he moved from CBS to NBC, where he handled a staff of 34 plus film crews covering local news in the Washington area and also did network news. In 1968 NBC wanted him to transfer to New York, but he did not want to move his family there. Simultaneously his mother in Manhattan, Kansas, was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

So the Darys returned to their roots (both are Kansas natives). Dary was a consultant, news director and first anchor for a new TV station in Topeka. He found no withdrawal pangs from leaving Washington “except I missed the restaurants.”

Later in 1968 he was recruited by the Kansas Republican State Committee. Dary told the GOP he had voted for Democrat Kennedy in 1960,

that his mother was a Democrat, his father a Republican, and he was pretty much an independent. Still he got the job, which included cranking out myriad news releases and working with the campaigns of Ronald Reagan (before the national convention) and Nixon and the first senatorial race of Bob Dole.

After this fling into politics, he completed his buffalo book, then took a broadcast teaching job at KU, where he also handled public relations for the university while obtaining his master's degree. (His bachelor's is from Kansas State.)

His master's thesis ultimately had an enormous effect on Dary's life.

He wrote a biography of A. B. MacDonald, a *Kansas City Star* reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize years earlier. In gathering material, Dary talked to Howard Turtle, editor of *Star* magazine, the newspaper's Sunday supplement. Turtle urged Dary to write history articles for the magazine.

He did—for eight years. Eventually a collection of those stories was published as *True Tales of the Old-Time Plains*. Dary was fully launched on a writing career.

Writing history, he finds, brings "a balance between the present and the past. The past is a relief in a sense; it provides a comfortable area in which one can work that doesn't have the constant change in the other half of one's life."

His 12th book, *Red Blood and Black Ink: Journalism in the Old West*, came out last year. His current venture is a major tome on the Santa Fe Trail. In addition, he has written chapters, introductions and text for numerous other books plus a booklet (on Comanche, the cavalry horse that survived the Custer massacre), more than 200 articles and countless book reviews for newspapers and magazines.

In 1960, before the U.S. Secret Service began protecting former presidents, reporter David Dary, at right with tape recorder and microphone, took a walk with Harry Truman, who was on a political visit to San Antonio.

His expertise has led to stints as president of Westerners International and of the Western Writers of America, plus an elected member of the Western History Association's governing council and the historical societies of Kansas and Oklahoma.

"I consider myself a writer who writes about history, not an academic historian," Dary says. Although he describes himself as a "regional writer," he says, "good stories of the West have universal appeal."

But not all history writing finds favor with him.

In an October 1996 speech to a joint meeting of the Western History Association and the Western Literature Association, he jolted his audience with a broadside against academic historians who "seek to perpetuate comfortable mediocrity, especially in their writing, perhaps believing dullness makes them great."

Historians must capture public interest by presenting information in interesting form, Dary says. "Good writing about history requires fact and emotion, two essential ingredients in any good story." Sadly, he concludes, that is not true of many academics, contributing heavily to historical illiteracy in America.

Samples from his denouncement: "They do not write to communi-

cate. They do not write to be read."

"Too many academic historians pick narrow or politically fashionable topics that are about as interesting as pet rocks."

"The talent for writing for a broad audience is considered secondary at best, a mark of intellectual deficiency at worst by academic historians."

Dary adds, "I was told I'd made some enemies" with the speech. "I thought it was about time to hit 'em over the head . . . I did it primarily to wake them up."

He has a special contempt for those who distort history or judge it by today's standards, whatever those are. Actions of long ago must be assessed against the standards of that era, he says. "Political correctness" in recent years has led to controversy ranging from history to vocabulary.

"I think that political correctness is dwindling," Dary believes. "We've been through the mill. You can take it to the extreme. The American people were being taken for a ride."

The chance to move to OU as journalism-mass communication director came as a surprise. Dary says he did not seek the post but was nominated by a friend. "I was content in Kansas. I was floored when told I was under consideration for the job." *continued*

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.

**“I felt like I was
a minister,
a consultant,
a mortician. If I
had known all the
problems that I
uncovered and
encountered, I
doubt if I would
have accepted the
position.”**

The OU school, which has sequences in journalism, broadcasting, advertising, public relations and professional writing, was in desperate shape. “Close to rock bottom” is how Dary puts it.

Budget woes had eliminated telephones and typewriters from offices. Faculty advising and availability to students was limited because professors often worked out of their homes. The Oklahoma Press Association was warring with the outgoing director, and the school faced likely loss of accreditation.

In addition, it had a bloated enrollment of some 1,100 students. “It was the dumping ground for the whole University,” Dary says. “If you couldn’t make it anywhere else, you were put in journalism.”

He hit the ground running. “The first thing I did was get private money to put in computers. Then we put in phones and long-distance service. My wife and I started with a social; probably two times a year since then we’ve had faculty gatherings at our house. We wanted people to communicate, and we wanted to know them.”

Professorial turnover has been heavy since Dary arrived. Although many retired or accepted good offers outside OU, “others—a minority—chose to seek employment elsewhere,” Dary says with a straight face.

Curriculum has been revamped and coursework made more demanding. Grade-point requirements to enter the program were raised. The number of students in JMC has dropped to a more manageable 730.

Strengthening the faculty was a must, Dary says. “We tried to hire people of solid professional experience of a quality nature. We were looking for somebody who’s a good teacher, who cares about students, looking for someone who’s a good scholar, a good writer.” A top teacher, he adds, must “know the material, have a passion for it and want to communicate it.”

He battled with tenured professors he claims did not perform. In an article in *The Oklahoma Publisher*, Dary wrote, “They believe that since they have tenure and academic freedom, there should be no controls, no reprimands, and they are responsible to no one.” Countering that attitude,

he argues, “All tenured professors have much freedom, but they also have the freedom to be responsible in their teaching, scholarship and service.”

At OU, Dary says, “It’s kind of an unwritten law in the school that we won’t hire anyone without at least five years professional experience. Every one of our ads talks about ‘substantial professional experience.’”

“I think we’ve been very successful in improving the quality of faculty. We have the foundation now on which to build.”

Most top journalism schools echo Dary’s insistence on in-the-field experience for professors, as well as scholarship. Dary, who has a master’s but not a doctorate, says, “A Ph.D. is primarily a research degree. It is essential in some disciplines, but not essential in journalism.”

After his hectic first year on the job, the school was granted provisional accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. It had one year to improve in order to retain approval.

Aided by the Oklahoma Press Association and other professionals, the school raised an additional \$150,000 to fund needed improvements. It subsequently was fully reaccredited.

“I felt like I was a minister, a consultant, a mortician” in those early days at OU, Dary says. “If I had known all the problems that I uncovered and encountered, I doubt if I would have accepted the position.”

In 1996, the ACEJMC accrediting team returned to Norman. This time the visitors found much that was posi-

tive in the JMC school and recommended full accreditation to their governing board, an action subsequently taken.

Team members said, “The school has regained a great deal of respect on the campus during the last six years. The director of the school has been the central figure in this resurgence. He has been extremely effective in overcoming weaknesses noted in the previous accreditation report . . .”

With JMC’s marked improvement and its students’ work receiving national awards, Dary seeks to make OU “one of the top four or five (journalism schools) in the country.” To do that, he wants to elevate the school to college rank. Dary calls that the final goal he set for himself when he became director.

“Journalism and mass communication are more important in society today than at any time in history,” he says. “The University should treat the field like it does law, business, architecture and engineering and give journalism and mass communication free-standing college status. It would enhance recruitment of faculty and students and boost our success with grants from several private foundations that favor colleges of journalism and mass communication over schools that respond to non-journalistic college administrators.”

Now in his 10th year as director, Dary seems ever on the go. In addition to many administrative duties plus teaching a class each semester, “I’ve got more books to write.” In rare spare time, he talks around the world via ham radio and listens to the BBC for current—and what he calls objective—news.

“I have so many interests—that’s my problem,” he says.

“I’ve found that you can’t do five things at once.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jenk Jones Jr. is the former editor and publisher of The Tulsa Tribune. A popular guest lecturer, he has served on professional advisory committees for three collegiate journalism programs, including OU’s H. H. Herbert School of Journalism and Mass Communication.