Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean. I'm a member of the Kansas Oral History Project Board and a former reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is August 18, 2025. We're here at Red Rocks, William Allen White's historic home in Emporia [KS] to interview two men who helped shape the political landscape in Kansas as reporters and press secretaries to governors: Mike Matson and Mike Swenson.

Mike Matson covered the Kansas Statehouse for WIBW Television in Topeka in the 1990s before joining the administration of former Governor Bill Graves. Mike Swenson was the first reporter to cover the Statehouse for Kansas Public Radio before moving on to KSNT Television in Topeka. In 1981 he joined former Governor John Carlin's staff, working initially as an assistant to Press Secretary Bill Hoch before taking the top job when Hoch left to start a consulting firm. Both men have compiled extensive resumes since, Swenson in public relations, Matson as a communications professional, author, and most recently a radio talk show host.

Our volunteer videographer today as always is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann. The idea for staging these interviews at this historic home came from Dave and Susie Murphy, the person who handles all of the logistics for us. White, of course, was the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the *Emporia Gazette*. He gained national fame for his stance against the Populist politics of the 1890s and later the Ku Klux Klan and for supporting the progressive policies of former President Theodore Roosevelt who became White's friends.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others to policy-making in Kansas. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. It's supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. Welcome, Mike, and you, too, Mike, both Mikes.

Mike Matson and Mike Swenson: Thank you.

JM: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this series.

MM: Thank you for the invitation.

MS: Thank you.

JM: I gave brief bios of both of you, but let's fill in the blanks a little bit for people. Your tenures in both the Graves and the Carlin offices were some years ago. Mike, since leaving Governor Carlin's office, you became a big shot in public relations in Kansas City, right?

MS: I did. I worked on another campaign.

JM: So, you're acknowledging that you were a big shot?

MS: I'm acknowledging I'm in Kansas City.

JM: All right.

MS: I worked on Tom Docking's campaign. We know that that one didn't pan out. So, I woke up one morning after the election. "What am I going to do?" I ended up going to Kansas City. I worked for a PR firm called the Boasberg Company for a year, and then moved to Barkley & Evergreen, an ad agency, to start a PR firm there. I retired from that 32 years later.

JM: But there were many iterations along the line.

MS: Along the way, yes. We can talk about some of that. We started out as a local, regional firm and became a national firm really in two areas: cause marketing and crisis communications.

JM: I'd forgotten that you worked on the Docking campaign. Tom Docking versus Mike Hayden.

MS: Correct.

JM: Tom Docking was lieutenant governor for John Carlin.

MS: In the second term, right.

JM: Mike Matson, you've also been busy making a name for yourself. You've held key positions in the Kansas Farm Bureau, the Kansas Leadership Center, the Manhattan [KS] Chamber of Commerce. You've written a book, a well-received book, and now you're hosting a radio talk show in Manhattan.

MM: Yes, when I left Bill Graves, I had the intention of getting into the private sector. I thought the experience that I'd had as a journalist and then later as a political operative would help me. At the time, I was engaged to be married to a woman who was living in Manhattan. So, it was where are you going to live, Topeka or Manhattan? The conversation lasted about ten seconds. Of course, we're going to live in Manhattan.

I ended up managing policy and communications for Kansas Farm Bureau, a family farmer rancher advocacy organization right at the beginning of the 21st century, right after the 2000 census showed that for the first time in the history of Kansans, urban and suburban Kansans outnumbered rural Kansans. So, we sort of had an opportunity to help shape a narrative and a message for rural Kansas doing that.

You mentioned I had the opportunity to serve sort of on a foundation level for a couple of start-ups the Kansas Leadership Center, what has now become the *Kansas City Beacon* digital journal. I was involved in the ground floor. Both of those.

So, now in what I laughingly refer to as "semi-retirement," you mentioned hosting a daily public or a daily talk radio show on a radio station in Manhattan, Kansas.

JM: At the Kansas Leadership Center, people for people—that was a creation of the Kansas Health Foundation. Ed O'Malley, a former Kansas legislator, created it and brought you on board to do communications work.

MM: Yes, Ed and I served together in the Graves administration when I was the governor's press secretary and communications director. Ed was right across the hall, managing constituent services. So, we would sort of gather at the end of the day. He'd deal all day with complaints. I would deal all day with pesky reporters. So, we sort of commiserated, took notes.

JM: Said lovingly.

MM: Exactly. Became friends, and then he went on, as you mentioned, to build the Kansas Leadership Center. I had the opportunity to help him to kind of build that out and get a sense of various constituencies that they were trying to reach. Ed, of course, has now gone on to be president of the Kansas Health Foundation.

JM: Do you want to talk about the book at all?

MM: Sure. I make no secret of my life. I am a recovering alcoholic addict, and I've written two books. The first one was after my father recognized that the end was coming, he wanted to have some purposeful conversations with me about his life. He and I were oil and water growing up. When he saw the end coming, he wanted to download some data about his life, and those conversations sort of basically confirmed what myself and my siblings had long thought, that he'd had a very difficult childhood based on his parents' addiction challenges.

So, that led to the first book, which is about my father's childhood. Then I wanted to write another one and was involved with a bunch of author communities and writing groups. Everyone's advice was, "Write what you know." What I knew was recovery from addiction. So, I set about to write that book. The first thing I did was devour a bunch of addiction memoirs because I didn't want to write what everybody else has written. That led to my second book, which is all about my early adult life. My hope and goal was to sort of lift up the traits and behaviors that I saw in myself at the time that led to the challenge of addiction and then the recovery that followed.

JM: The book was called *Courtesy Boy*.

MM: *Courtesy Boy*, which was a title of a job that I had at a supermarket in Wichita as a young man. You'd stock groceries. You'd sack groceries. You'd carry them out. The owner of the supermarket called those young men, "courtesy boys." So, that was the title of the book.

JM: I mentioned in the opening that both of you helped to shape the political landscape in Kansas, Mike, you in the late eighties, and then Mike, you later in the nineties, Bill Graves, John Carlin, respectively. The reason I wanted to talk to you both together is because you share this unique path. You literally went from covering John Carlin and Bill Graves one day to working for them the next day. Essentially, it was almost like the transition was that quick.

A couple of things to unpack there. What were the initial challenges in making that transition?

MM: That's a great question. For me, Jim, it was, I can remember, I was covering the campaign, the run-up to the '94 campaign for governor. At the time on the Democratic side, it was Jim Slattery and Joan Wagnon that were duking it out for the nomination. There were a host of Republicans. Graves was among them.

I had known Graves personally because he was secretary of state at the time, and I covered him in that role. I had an interest in working for his campaign, but it was really difficult. How do you have that conversation? If I'm an active journalist, and I'm covering him as a candidate, I don't just go up to him and buttonhole him and say, "Hey, can I have a job?" because that would sort of impact my credibility as a journalist.

What I ended up doing was sort of third-party. There were people that were close to Graves that I had relationships with and would work that. So, you would send messages to each other, back and forth in this sort of cryptic fashion, and it took months. I often told the story, Bill Graves is the kind of manager that was not going to offer the job on the campaign until he was certain the answer was going to be yes because he didn't want to offer the job to me or anyone and have them turn him down because he was concerned about perception at that point.

So, it took months, and we kind of danced around each other. One day, I was in Topeka, and he called me up and he said, "I understand you'd like to work for my campaign." "Yes, I would."

So, we cut the deal, and literally one day went from the guy that was asking the tough questions to the next day the guy that was answering the tough questions.

JM: That's interesting. That begs a couple of questions.

MM: Sure.

JM: In that transition period, where you were already mentally thinking about going to work for a guy that you were still covering, what did you do to make sure that your coverage was still as critical as it needed to be?

MM: Great question. That was always uppermost on my mind because I needed to maintain credibility as a journalist. Right, if you're covering a campaign especially, you want to make sure that you're being fair to all candidates.

So, what I would do, I would find a couple of people that I trusted, and I would ask them to check me. "Here's what I want to say in this."

JM: You should have asked me.

MM: I should have asked you.

JM: Because there's a story there.

MM: There's in fact a story there. But that's what I did because you're right. I wanted to make sure that I wasn't leaning that way.

JM: It would be hard in some ways not to. You have to check yourself.

MM: Exactly. Yes.

JM: And just to get this out in the open, I mean, you went to work for the Graves campaign in '94. I was working for the guy running against him, Jim Slattery who had emerged from that primary against Joan Wagnon. We were on opposite sides of a partisan battle. It never got too acrimonious.

MM: I think that's exactly right. I had a lot of respect for you as a journalist and what you did. I had a lot of respect for Jim Slattery, too. He was my Congressman at the time. And politics was a different era back then. You basically had Jim Slattery who was a fiscal conservative, and you had Bill Graves who was the quintessential moderate Republican. I remember before I went to work for them, I did a story about it's the same guy.

JM: A lot of people drew that conclusion.

MM: Exactly.

JM: From a policy standpoint.

MM: Sure, yes.

JM: You weren't going to get a very different approach to policy under either one of them. Both of them were kind of cleaved to that middle ground.

MM: I think that's exactly right.

JM: Mike Swenson, you, too, had a similar experience. You were covering—

MS: I did. I had a serendipitous moment when I was working as an intern at KANU, and Howard Hill who was the general manager then walked up to me one day and said, "We're thinking about starting a Statehouse bureau and covering the legislature. Would you be interested?" And I don't know how fast I said yes, but I said yes pretty fast.

So, that turned into—I mean, that was an important first step. It was like I got one of my Forrest Gump moments. It got me into the Capitol.

JM: What year would that have been?

MS: That would have been '76, '77, '78. I stayed on at KANU in an internship for all those years. I started the Statehouse bureau, covered it. At the same time, I was working at Channel 27 on the weekends and getting my foot in the door there. When I graduated, 27 hired me, and I started covering the Statehouse. I covered city county actually first.

Then I went behind the camera, which I really enjoyed. I did directing and producing for about two years. Then I went back in front of the camera to cover the legislature again. What was interesting is, that was the '81 session. It's when the severance tax on oil and gas was first introduced by Governor Carlin. So I'm covering an issue that would come to basically be the issue for three years in Kansas politics. I'm covering that. Ron Harbaugh who was one of our co-anchors at Channel 27, I'd come back from the Statehouse every day, and he'd go, "Mike, do you have a picture of that severance tax yet that we could use?" because TV, you're always looking for video. I'd say, "No, I didn't find it today, Ron, but I do have a minute-and-a-half story.

JM: Just a bunch of oil drums.

MS: Exactly. So, the next serendipitous moment came, I'm standing right underneath the John Brown, walking along, and Bill Hoch—

JM: The Curry mural in the Statehouse.

MS: The Curry mural at the Statehouse, thank you. Bill Hoch walks up. He's the press secretary to Carlin. I had known Bill in college. He was a grad assistant of mine. We'd met, and of course, I'd been covering the governor. So, I'd gotten to know him as a reporter. Bill walks up to me and says, "Don Smith who's my assistant is leaving, and I'm interested in talking to you about becoming assistant press secretary." So just a bolt out of the blue.

JM: And you said yes quickly again.

MS: No, I did not. I didn't say yes quickly because I wrote a paper in the eighth grade saying I want to be a broadcast journalist.

JM: I see.

MS: I definitely told him I'm very interested. One of the things is my family has always been involved in Democratic politics. It goes back to my grandfather Ross Swenson who was the Democratic Party chairman in Republic County in northcentral Kansas.

JM: Does Republic County still have a Democratic chairman?

MS: Well, he said at that time they met in phone booths in terms of the Democratic meetings. But he'd always been involved. He was a big supporter of Governor George and Bob Docking.

My dad served on the school board, elected two terms on the school board, and ran for mayor but did not win. So, we've always been involved in politics.

So, what I knew, I also had a political pedigree to go along with a journalistic pedigree, and that's one of the things Bill said was important, why I'm talking to you. I thought about it for only a day or two. I got back and said, "Yes, I'll do it."

So, I turned in my credentials at Channel 27, took two weeks off, and walked back into the Capitol in a different role, just as Mike did. It went smoother than I thought it might. Again, that goes back to the Statehouse press corps at the time, too. During the session, there were thirty people in the press corps.

JM: I remember.

MS: We had, every station in Wichita, you had the [*Wichita*] *Eagle* with multiple reporters. You had the [*Kansas City*] *Star,* and the *Kansas City Times* was still alive, the morning paper. Both had staff.

MS: AP [Associated Press] and UPI, Harris newspapers and all the TV stations and radio stations. There were thirty, thirty-five people during the session. We can talk about how that's changed dramatically.

But I built a good relationship with those reporters. They saw me as a trustworthy guy, I guess, but they also knew that I was now playing a different role. It was a good transition, and I never looked back. I called it my grad school, those five years as being, because I went through the re-election. Carlin was re-elected in '82 easily for a Democrat. I served as his press secretary for four more years.

JM: One of the reasons I really love talking to both of you is all the connection points here. I first met Mike Madson when he was working for the Kansas Information Radio Network in Wichita. I remember coming down there. We did some candidate debates.

MM: Yes.

JM: When we were down in Wichita. You started the KANU, the Kansas Public Radio Bureau. So, soon after you left, I was an intern in 1981.

MS: Right.

JM: So, all of these connection points plus we share a similar history of crossing that Mendoza Line, so to speak. I think I'm the only one who went back into reporting.

MS: You did.

JM: I still don't know how that happened. I could ask you about that.

MM: Well, I was going to say, now I am back doing this daily talk radio show in Manhattan.

JM: That's right.

MM: And it's where I started my career in broadcast journalism.

JM: I love radio.

MS: I do too.

MM: We've only been doing it since last fall. And when I got back into it, I said, "What I want to do with this show"—let me make a quick point. We went to talk to some marketing pros. I said, "We're going to do a live radio daily talk show," and they said, "No, no, it may be live, and it may be on the radio, but people will consume this as a recorded podcast." So, that's the difference between when I left the industry in 1994 to the way people consume data and information from the media today.

JM: That's right. They listen at their convenience.

MM: Right. I think I knew that sort of intuitively, but until I got into it and realized that, yes, that's exactly the way people consume this. My frame of reference was as "It's journalism. It's broadcast journalism. It's immediate. You're going to get it on the air right now." That was the nature of the media. It just gives you a sense of how consumers of news media have evolved over the years related to that.

I like to think that what I'm doing now is sort of, it just plays on what I describe as a career's worth of journalistic instincts. As a reporter, I had them. As a press secretary, I had them. In the private sector, I had them. They served me well. And now again, I laughingly refer to it as "semi-retirement." It's supposed to be fifteen to twenty hours a week, but everything that I've learned over my career I bring to bear today in that effort with the radio talk show.

JM: If you remember back to those times when you were—Graves obviously was easily elected in that race over Slattery. That was a Republican landslide nationwide that year. Then I had to go off and find something else to do. Pete Stauffer hired me to edit a business publication that then got taken into the *Capitol-Journal*. I spent some time there as a business reporter of all things, and they wanted to send me back to the Statehouse. I was eager to do it, but I thought, "Hey, this might be a problem." So, I actually had to get a meeting with the governor. He was fine with it. I don't think I ever asked you—how did you feel about that?

MM: Once I knew he was fine with it, then I could salute smartly. I was going to be fine with it, too.

JM: Okay, but you had your doubts probably.

MM: I knew you were legitimate. You know when you see reporters and you see the work that they do and you carry that into another line of work. I knew you, Jim McLean, you were trustworthy. I knew you were a straight shooter. I knew that your motives were pure in terms of what you were trying to do. So, I didn't have any concerns about that. I can't say that about every other reporter I've met in my career.

JM: I was hoping that if you thought about it for just a second, you might conclude that I was going to bend over backwards to be fair to the point where—

MM: The thought entered my mind.

JM: I wanted to make sure that the optics were—six months down the road, I wanted people to be like—but we had this conversation earlier, and I wanted to delve into it a little bit because I know how I felt. I was always curious about politics all my life. When I had the chance to see how it operated from the inside, I was fascinated by that. I quickly concluded that most of the power was on the other side of the line, at least in those days, with the media. You could cajole; you could suggest. You couldn't control what they did really.

But having said that, I remember when I was a press secretary to Congressman Slattery, I didn't perceive my job as just boosting his prospects politically. I felt I really still owed an obligation to the public. My job was to broker information through the media. And I think, Mike, you put it really well when you said when you made that transition, you perceived that you had two bosses.

MS: Absolutely, because again, my career was going to be in broadcast journalism. So, even though I only spent seven years as a broadcast journalist—

JM: They were formative years.

MS: They were formative years. And to digress for a moment, I worked for the TV station, Channel 27 in Topeka. When I got there, we were still shooting 16-millimeter film with little Bell & Howell cameras, when I left, we were doing live shots. So, I literally was at that—in those four years where local television stations—

JM: Changed a lot.

MS: Not just national, local were going from film to live, through video to live. But I always felt like, you know, at the end of the day, I'm getting paid by John Carlin to be his press secretary and do the best I can for him to get his message out there. On the other hand, I felt a connection with the media who I'd worked with—and those people I literally had worked with. It wasn't like I was coming in from somewhere else. I literally had worked with those people side by side as reporters covering stories. So, I had a sense for how they liked to work, and each one is different.

So it became kind of like convincing the people I worked with in the governor's staff that "I'm going to occasionally say to you, Governor, that we need to do this this way because we're dealing with a reporter here who likes to get information like this or likes to focus in on this or there's this angle, and you need to listen to me because we want to make sure we get the most out of this for us. We also want to make sure that we keep a good relationship with that reporter."

MM: That's a great point. Just a couple of points to build on that point that Mike was talking about. I can remember sort of two different ways of thinking in my job as the governor's press secretary. One was as the press secretary, the spokesperson for the candidate. And a political campaign is purely political.

MS: A hundred percent, yes.

MM: The goal is to elect your guy. Everything, all the decisions you make are looked at through that prism. When he or she gets elected, all of a sudden, your job is to govern and to come up with policy ideas that will move the state forward based on the winner's thinking. That changes the dynamic considerably for the job that Mike and I did in that role. Purely, blatantly political, you're going to think differently than you would as the governor's press secretary or the governor's spokesman.

What I found myself doing was that I was able to make that transition because we had a full policy agenda, and you recall, in the mid-nineties, we were flush with money, and we couldn't shovel the tax funds back fast enough. So, it was a relatively, it was a good news story that we were communicating. But it wasn't quite as sharp. It didn't have an edge to it the way a political message might versus a policy message.

JM: Did you also both perceive, when you're a reporter, you believe you're working for the public at large, at least I did.

MM: Correct, yes.

JM: You're serving the public interest by getting information to them. I carried that sense of mission with me into that press secretary's job to the point where when you are in a political context or in a public relations context, let's say you're a PR firm. Somebody hires you. Some corporate entity hires you to push a message out there, and they expect results. There's an expectation for people who don't know journalism that you can produce a good—you can produce with the message you have to work with. You can get the results they need. You can cajole. You can do this. You have the power to influence it to that extent. So that expectation is a little bit unfair because—did you ever push back when people expected good coverage, and a bad story would occur? You would have to communicate, "That's not what I do. I don't control that. I try to influence it. I try to steer it. But you can't control that."

MS: No, and I think the message you learn—and that's where my graduate school comment comes in—I think you learn to your point is that you've got to be able to say to your boss, in this case, a governor, "We don't want to throw gasoline on our own fire here. We can sit here and maybe push back and start arguing or whatever, but we're just going to turn this one-day story into a three-day or a five-day story. If we just nip it in the bud, accept that a bad story's happened, we move on." We make our points. It's something that we need to fix in state government. We're going to fix it, and we fix it and move on. But let's get off that bad story as soon as possible. That's I think to your point that's what you would try to do is to say, "Let's don't let a bad story become worse."

JM: It's a two-way communication job. You're speaking truth to your boss, and you're trying to maintain your credibility with reporters.

MS: Right.

JM: "I'm a straight shooter here. I'm giving you the information that you need to have so that you can communicate credibly to the public."

MS: And that's how it used to work.

JM: We can get into that. That is how it used to work. It's very much changed.

MM: Just a quick example of what you guys are talking about. I remember—first, Bill Graves was a tremendous communicator. He had innate skills.

JM: He was a natural.

MM: He was a natural.

JM: He was himself. He was comfortable in his own skin.

MM: He didn't need me whispering in his ear saying, "Here's what you need to say." He understood how to work a room. He understood how to read a room. He understood how to conduct himself in a news conference setting. But he's a human being, and so I remember our first one related to the concept that Mike was just describing. We were in office about ninety days and decided we were going to have a Cabinet retreat at his father-in-law's resort in

Oklahoma. You can imagine, the question arises, logically, "Aren't Kansas retreats good enough for you?"

He didn't want to take on his father-in-law. He didn't want to take on his wife. So, what should have been a twenty-four-hour story kind of hung on for a while, just because of personal things. He was a little reluctant to take them on. Those are the kinds of things that you deal with at that level.

JM: And you had to manage Governor Carlin through a couple of those rough spots.

MS: There were a couple of rough spots. Obviously, he was divorced in office. Now I would always remind reporters that Bob Dole was divorced, too. So, let's don't get carried away here. That would be my political side coming through.

JM: But it was true.

MS: But, it was true. Again, it was like, "How do we handle this and just get through it and move on?" We tried to do that. Shortly after his second divorce was final, he went on a statewide tour to promote a policy issue that got a lot of coverage, and the divorce story kind of faded away because it was over.

Now my best story about a question I could not anticipate was when the governor and Karen got married. Martin Hawver has a question. We all know Martin. I know you've interviewed him for this oral history. So, Martin, we're about thirty minutes into the press conference, and Martin goes, "Governor, did you get a tea cozy for a wedding present?" Classic Martin Hawver moment.

JM: Who in the world would come up with that one?

MS: No one. No one. I went up to Carlin afterwards, "Yes, I didn't predict that one. I'm sorry."

JM: Didn't prep you for that one. Did he get a tea cozy?

MS: I don't think he did.

JM: We've talked a little bit about how things have changed. Let's just start with this threshold question. The governors that you worked for, what was their attitude towards the media? It was a slightly adversarial relationship, but it didn't need to be hostile. My perception for being on the other end of that relationship was that they understood that—they really did think that they had to work through the media to get their message out to the public, which isn't the case anymore. Am I correct in that?

MS: Absolutely.

MM: I think with us, we were in office in the nineties. The Internet was just being invented.

JM: Al Gore was hard at work on it.

MM: Al Gore was hard at work at that. The media was our vehicle to communicate the narrative. We knew that we've got a policy agenda. We want to share that policy agenda with the people of Kansas. That was the most effective way. So, we would develop strategies and tactics aimed at using the media through news conferences, through lunches with editorial writers at Cedar Crest, a whole menu of different things to help communicate that because that was the way it was done at the time, and it's not that way anymore.

I'm not sure—in the first place, I wouldn't want to work that hard, but I'm not sure I could do that job today. What I did in the nineties, I'm not sure I could be successful doing it today, given the dynamic that's at play with respect to all the information that's out there.

MS: If you talk about, Jim, you've mentioned this a few times, we couldn't always control things. I think it would be very difficult to control anything today because with social media and everybody's a journalist with a camera, every event becomes covered by people who aren't journalists, and all of a sudden, you're having to deal with that noise that's out there. I think it would be incredibly difficult to work with a politician today to try to sort all that out. I think that's part of the problem is that we've, you know, we're into camps now. But back when we worked into the late nineties and even early 2000s, everybody still got in a room and worked things out.

JM: There were camps, but people fraternized between the camps.

MS: Exactly.

MM: Exactly. And I think part of the challenge, too, now is we have elected leaders in these offices who will make a purposeful strategy to not talk to the media. They do that on purpose.

JM: Because they perceive that they don't need to.

MM: Or they perceive that the questions they will get will not help them move their agenda.

JM: And they can communicate directly to—access the voter rolls. Who are my voters? Who are yours? That's gotten so sophisticated. They can just talk to their people and bypass the tougher questions.

MM: Correct. I think we've lost something in that. I've seen that. I'm not going to call him out, but I just look at Senator Moran. Senator Jerry Moran started his career during this time that we're describing, and there was a time he was very accessible. I have a standing invitation to Senator Moran and Senator Marshall and Congressman Mann to come on my show any time they want, and they haven't done it yet. It's not that they don't trust me, or they don't want to do it. I think it's part of a strategy that they have adopted that we're not going to deal with the media the way we would have in the nineties.

MS: And the difference is when we were doing this and you were doing it, Jim, every trip our boss took, "Give me thirty minutes so I can get him with media in Hays, in Garden City, in Pratt.

JM: The local editor and . . .

MS: Yes. Make sure I've got thirty minutes to get him in front of the media there." They wanted to do it. They knew that was their way to talk to the people in that locale directly.

JM: I've had this conversation with other people who we've interviewed for this series. One of the reasons that doesn't happen today is because there is no there there.

MS: That is so true.

JM: You go to some of these communities.

MS: There's nothing.

JM: There's maybe a newspaper that's connected to another newspaper, but there's not a reporter in the building that's covering that community. In those days, you had the Emerson Lynns at the

Iola Register. You had Clyde Reed. You had the Seatons. You had all of these newspaper publishers who would write editorials that were influential in their communities. Not very much of that exists today.

MS: We did a monthly column from the governor that went to every newspaper in Kansas.

JM: I did the same thing.

MM: Yes.

MS: At that time, there were 110 weekly newspapers still.

JM: Yes. I wrote the same column for Congressman Slattery.

MS: There may be five to your point today that are conglomerates of ten papers.

JM: I'm glad you reminded me of that. This is another change, I think. I can remember sitting down to write those columns. We would have a conversation, "What are we going to write about this week? Is it going to be NAFTA?" It was always going to be some real issue where we would try very hard in the column to say, "This is the position I'm taking, and this is why." Yes, it was a political agenda, but you also felt an obligation to explain yourself. It wasn't just PR puff. It served a purpose.

I can still remember feeling very much responsible for having it checked and double checked and edited and so forth. It felt like a real responsibility because you were communicating something important to people.

MS: And, those papers were printing those columns.

JM: They were printing them. And those weekly newspapers would sit around the doctor's office all week and get read and reread and read. It was an important thing. Actually I think there's some weekly papers in Kansas that are doing better than the old dailies. I think there's still a little bit of a robust system out there.

MM: Agreed.

JM: I can remember the news conferences. Governor Carlin almost weekly.

MS: Yes, just about every Friday.

JM: Governor Graves.

MM: Every Friday.

JM: Every Friday, particularly during the session, right?

MM: Yes.

JM: And as you mentioned, the press corps numbering twenty-some, thirty.

MM: And what we would do with those news conferences, they were Friday afternoon, usually 1:30, right after lunch, and it was a purposeful strategy and a tactic that the governor would use to help communicate his message. It's not that he would open with a statement. Sometimes he would.

JM: Sometimes.

MM: More often than not, it was, "What's on your mind?" But if I had done my job right, then I would know what every reporter in the room was writing about. When I'm doing my job right, I'm down on the first floor. I'm building relationships with those reporters. They're not going to tell me what they're doing if it's something, a scoop, but I can get a sense. All I have to do is follow what they're doing.

If you have a good enough relationship—that's the thing. That's probably my biggest take-away from moving from journalism, which tended to be antagonistic by nature and sort of aggressive and assertive to get the story, I had to change my attitude a little bit when I became a press secretary because all of a sudden, they need as much as I need them, and I don't want to be the bad guy. So, I would build a relationship with the reporters, and I'd get a sense of what they're writing on. That's the information—we would work up a three-page memo for the governor and senior staff. "Here's what they're thinking," and that memo would circulate Friday mornings on the senior staff so everyone would have a sense, "The governor had these relationships of his own." Those became sort of an effective tool for us to help communicate the narrative.

Another thing we did really early on right after taking office in January '95 was to not only make sure that I, as his spokesperson, was building and maintaining and nurturing these relationships, but the daily beat reporters, we would court or woo, if you will, the editorial writers and the columnists at the time. We'd bring them to Cedar Crest and give them lunch. We'd lay it on thick. The idea was to help them understand that we're trying to communicate our message, and you guys can help us do that.

A quick story. Randy Brown, you guys remember Randy Brown?

JM: The *Eagle*.

MM: An editorial writer for the *Eagle*.

JM: He went on to the *Business Journal*, I think.

MM: Yes, one of our very first courting sessions at Cedar Crest, and we're serving him lunch. My job is to babysit between the two, and the governor would be right here. "Have you met the First Lady?" All the opulence of Cedar Crest, and we'd get there, and the governor comes in, and they're having lunch, and I'm over assuming the staff position on the side. And Randy asks the governor, "So, what do you think after a couple of weeks? What your impression of the Kansas legislature?" And the governor is feeling his oats. He's had a wonderful victory. We've got nothing but money to give away. He says, "Well, the Kansas legislature is a lot like any gathering of 165 people. There's some brilliant people there, and then you've got your idiots."

JM: True enough. Nevertheless.

MM: My eyes are getting wide. But to his credit because he was such an effective communicator, he understood immediately he'd made a mistake, as Randy is scribbling, right? "But, of course, your governor has his shortcomings, too." Those are the kind of things that you just kind of learn as you go along. But all of these strategies aimed at moving sort of this political/policy agenda.

JM: So your first guest was Randy Brown, not David Awbrey.

MM: It was Randy Brown, yes, and that was purposeful, too.

JM: We could ask you why, but I think I know the answer to that.

MM: Fair enough.

MS: We did a prep session. We'd start our news conference usually at 2:00. Sometimes in the morning if he had something going on. Actually, we loved the morning ones, 10:00 a.m. Friday morning.

JM: Why?

MS: Because that meant the governor had to go somewhere and he's leaving town. It was going to be a nice afternoon. We could go—

JM: Friday afternoon without the governor in the office.

MS: It made it nice. But we would do a session where just like Mike talked about, I'd be searching for "What are you going to talk about?" from reporters, and, of course, they get into the game, too. They stop up and have their cup of coffee and sit there. They'll say, "We need to know more about this." It would make my list. 1:30, we would get into the old lieutenant governor's office across the hall from the governor's office in the Capitol. Whatever the issues were, I'd make sure the right Cabinet members were there. All the staff was going to be there anyway. We'd just go through the issues, see what was going to come up.

JM: If the governor needed any specific information, he wanted the people there.

MS: Right. If it was a tax issue, the secretary of revenue is going to be there to say, "Here's the things we're working on," blah, blah, blah. We'd do that.

And then I think it's important to know why we all choose Friday because if I could wake up on Sunday morning and turn on WIBW radio and hear a story from the governor's Friday afternoon news conference, I knew we were there.

JM: You got two days.

MM: Three days.

MS: You've got Friday afternoon. You've got the whole weekend you're going to get coverage, and it's the governor, and the governor just like the President has the loudest bullhorn. There they are on Sunday mornings. Stories are still being written from the Friday afternoon news conference. Especially during the session, those are important.

MM: Absolutely.

JM: Right, and sometimes that story lasted even until Monday morning.

MS: Yes.

JM: I remember showing up to do news casts on radio on Monday morning. Sometimes, the cupboard was pretty bare with what you had to work with.

MS: Right.

MM: Some wire copy and maybe one soundbite. "They should have left me something more than this," right?

MS: "I've got thirty minutes of Carlin from Friday afternoon. Let me see what's left there."

JM: It's funny. When I was working at the Mighty KLKC in Parsons where I got my Les Nessman start in the business, I remember Bob Whittaker who was a Congressman in the 5th

District when Kansas still had five districts. He would send out a reel-to-reel tape of just him talking about issues. I got so desperate when Monday came around, I would cut soundbites out of that reel-to-reel tape and put them on the radio.

MS: His mission was accomplished.

JM: Absolutely.

MM: Check the box.

JM: Right. I got what I needed out of it, too.

MS: Exactly.

JM: A sound other than my voice on the radio.

MS: The point we're making, we worked for both sides. We both needed each other.

JM: In the days we talked about, the media relationship with people who were in positions of authority, elected positions, is always going to be—I don't think people understand the word "adversarial." That doesn't mean "hostile." It means, "I've got a job to do. You've got a job to do, but we have to work together if either one of us is going to do our jobs effectively." At least that was the thought then.

But I can remember, Mike [Swenson] particularly during your day, I think it waned somewhat by the time [Mike Matson] came into the position, but the press corps had a softball team. We would play the governor's office.

MS: Every summer.

JM: We would play the attorney general's office. We would play the secretary of state's office. Governor Carlin always brought in Highway Patrol officers as ringers.

MS: That's true. We did.

JM: We still beat you.

MS: I know. We tried. We tried. Well, I made sure that you beat us. What do you mean?

JM: Oh, no!

MM: Speaking of effective tactics.

JM: Bill Vogrin, a former AP reporter, he would talk forever about how he hit a line drive over Carlin's head. You arranged that? Bill didn't really?

MS: No, Bill did that himself. He's a good softball player. We did those kinds of things, and we would have a lot of interaction with media outside of—

JM: You mentioned, we would come up to your office, you and Bill Hoch and Sondra Ekey—was Sondra out there from the very beginning?

MS: Jane first, and then Sondra.

JM: And we'd just have a cup of coffee. You'd have all the newspapers up there. We'd scan the newspapers. We ate donuts sometimes. There was a purpose to all that.

MS: Yes.

MM: Sure.

MS: If we had a really good story to get out, that's when the donuts came out.

JM: Even when we'd go to the governor's news conference, we'd walk into that front office, the news conference would be back in the inner sanctum.

MS: We still did it in the main office.

JM: We'd help ourselves to a cup of coffee in the governor's office. Things were so different. I covered one entire session sitting in the Speaker's office drinking coffee. Now reporters can't even get on the floor [of the House chamber].

MS: Which is not good.

MM: It's unfortunate. I think that's just sort of evidence of the evolution of the way that politics has moved forward. You think about that, boil that down. The speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives has made a decision that he will not allow reporters on the floor of the House. That's unheard of in our day. What does that mean?

JM: Yes, what does that mean?

MM: What does that mean? Effective reporters are going to find a way to work around that. If I was a reporter there, okay, I can't go on the floor, but I'm going to go up to the Chamber or whatever. They'll find a way to work around it. But it's unfortunate and what it does though, Jim, is it gets to the point you're making. It sort of entrenches that notion of us versus them.

JM: It becomes hostile to some degree.

MM: It becomes adversarial in a way that it doesn't need to be because you could still get done what you needed to get done on both sides.

JM: I can remember sitting at the press desk on the House floor or the Senate floor, either one, and the sidebar conversations we would have were as informative as whatever you were covering.

MS: Yes.

MM: Sure.

JM: When I would go back in the speaker's office, Kent Glasscock was the speaker at the time. A guy named John Edmonds, a Republican from Great Bend, a pretty conservative guy, he was chair of the Tax Committee. He would be sitting back there. You'd kind of get to know John and why he thought this way about that. Again, in those days, I still remember this. He was conservative. He didn't like taxes, but he was chair of the Tax Committee. And the state needed more revenue this one session. There was a sales tax bill—I think it was a sales tax bill, but a tax bill working its way through the process.

And John Edmonds after a long debate, got up and in his role as tax chairman, he said, "You know I'm really not in favor of taxes, but the state needs this, and as the chairman, I'm going to do what I need to do," and he actually spoke in favor of it because he felt like that was his responsibility as the chair of the committee. He transcended his personal beliefs in that moment. Again, that is the product of collegiality across the board that doesn't—

MS: I remember at the end of every legislative session is always the funnest part. Legislation has been lingering, and now the rush is on to finish the session.

JM: Notwithstanding 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning.

MS: Yes. But I remember every session I was working with Governor Carlin, there was a point where there was going to be a meeting in the governor's office and the speaker of the House, Mike Hayden was going to be in there. Senate leadership was going to be in there. The appropriate committee chairs and the legislators were going to be in there.

JM: You're going to hammer out the end of—

MS: A couple of Democrats. It's like "We've got four things we need to pass. Let's get out of here. What do you need? What do you need?" They still were able to work together and make progress all at the same time.

MM: It's a great point. When I was a journalist covering politics in government for the TV station in Topeka, I thought I knew a lot about how the process worked. Then I got on the other side and realized there's so much more to it that I didn't know as a journalist. I'd like to consider myself an effective journalist, and it goes to exactly the things Mike was talking about. You get the Senate president up there, or you get the speaker of the House. If they were of differing parties, you'd bring them in at different times, but you would spend time hammering out these compromises. You'd say, "How many votes you got? How many can you bring?" and they would just horse trade. You would get to where you needed to go to close down the session.

JM: So, none of us are in those rooms today, but we can all speculate about how—the optics. You can just tell even from the outside looking in that things have changed. Inevitably, change happens, and people of my age tend to look back and think things were better then than they are now, but I think a case could actually be made in the context of what we're talking about in terms of brokering honest information where politicians felt like they had to explain themselves to their constituents. It was an imperative there. I do think that has changed to some degree.

MS: It started in the early 2000s.

JM: I think you're right.

MS: Where—Kansas was kind of a bellwether because within the Republican Party in Kansas, you began to notice there was beginning to be the split between a Bill Graves Republican and more conservative Republicans.

JM: We could talk about that. That happened when he was in office.

MS: Yes, it did. It started happening—but I think as you get into your camps, it's kind of like, "Okay, I'm going to vote this way. I'm going to vote this way, and that's it." We don't have a chance to get in the room. So, what do you see? How many pieces of legislation go through with strictly party line votes now because there's no crossover in terms of what you were just talking about, that committee chair saying, "I believe this, but we need to pass this legislation, even though I disagree with it."

JM: There's actually been some research relative to Congress about crossover voting. The people who used to engage in crossover voting, moderate Republicans, conservative Democrats, aren't there anymore.

MS: Right.

JM: So, there isn't any. We talked about, "Is it better? Is it worse?" That is a metric that is undeniable. When things are passing by—particularly at the national level where the vice president is casting the deciding vote, and it's split exactly down party lines, long term, that can't be good for the Republic.

MM: I agree. I think of the Obamacare vote on the national level. It took the Democratic majority for that to occur. When you think about that at the state level, you guys nailed it. It started in the mid-nineties when the conservative Republicans first sort of began to feel their oats a little bit.

And I don't know what the answer is, but I know it's not good. I'm like you, Jim. I look back, and I reflect on how it used to be, and it wasn't perfect, but at least you had people in the room that were willing to talk to each other. I think that's part of the challenge now.

JM: You were there in those rooms, Mike [Matson], when this started to happen.

MM: Yes.

JM: Governor Graves, as we mentioned, Kansas had a long history of dominance by moderate Republicans in Johnson County and even in rural parts of the state who were fiscally conservative, somewhat socially progressive, but believed very much in public education. That was just kind of the narrative storyline throughout.

And Graves personified that. He was a moderate, middle-of-the-road Republican, and then that split started to come into evidence when he was governor. I remember Phil Kline and the whole issue, whether we were going to reduce taxes, and the governor felt in that time—you tell me. He felt compelled to some degree to respond because their numbers were growing at the time.

MM: You're exactly right. It happened actually in '94. The year that Bill Graves was elected governor was also the year that the House Republicans had enough conservatives to be able to take over the speakership. That December before we took office, Tim Shallenburger was elected speaker of the House.

JM: Tim Shallenburger from Baxter Springs who was the speaker of the House, was gone for a long time. He's now back in the State Senate.

MS: Vice president of the Senate.

MM: It was the first time where you had a conservative Republican in charge of the House, and he was not interested in having the conversations that we're talking about. That was a decision they had made as that faction of the party. I'm not going to argue that it was right or it was wrong. It was exactly what they wanted to do.

And you're right, Jim. Bill Graves recognized that and understood that, "All right. I've got a handful of moderate Republicans." A lot of Democrats, we all kind of feel the same way. So we built coalitions, and we were able to kind of marginalize the conservative Republicans. It didn't make them happy. It probably didn't add to anything that would have led back toward some peaceful conversations.

JM: Reconciliation, right.

MM: It was still what we needed to do in order to enact policy that we felt most Kansans supported.

JM: It's interesting that Governor Graves had to form a governing coalition with his moderate Republicans and some Democrats.

MM: Right.

JM: Kathleen Sebelius had to do the same thing in the opposite way to get anything done when she was governor as a Democrat.

MM: Again, these are sort of political strategies and tactics based on what you've got on the ground at the time. And effective politicians like Sebelius, like Graves are going to figure that out and do what they need to do.

So, to a certain extent, we were able again to marginalize or push to the side because they just didn't have the numbers. But part of the problem, we wouldn't have done that had they been willing to have conversations the way their predecessors a generation earlier might have been willing to. It might have felt the same way ideologically. Hard right conservative Kansans, that's who we are in many ways, but over the years, this idea of sitting down and having meaningful conversations to lead to a positive outcome changed.

JM: Mike [Swenson], you're still somewhat engaged. How much work are you doing? You still do some PR work?

MS: I'm a consultant for a couple of clients. One of my clients is engaged in the legislative process. So, I'm back in, so to speak.

JM: How much different is it today when you try to weigh in? Maybe you have some contact, some interaction with reporters when there are issues or concern for your client. How different is it today?

MS: There's fewer people to deal with. Some I've gotten to know because I got involved in a campaign a few years ago that kind of re-engaged me with the media. So, I got to know the current group of Statehouse press corps. It's just there are fewer members. They have to do more.

Here's the best example. When I was press secretary for John Carlin, the Associated Press bureau had three people year-round and five people during the session. John Hanna has been on his own as the only AP reporter for how long now?

JM: A long time.

MS: A long time. That's the best example. A wire service serving everybody is 20 percent of what it used to be in terms of number of reporters.

JM: In your day, you had two, UPI and AP.

MS: And the Harris newspapers.

JM: Some newspapers subscribed to both.

MS: Yes.

JM: Some were AP, UPI. I actually went down to talk to John Hanna who's still at the Statehouse, probably the dean of the Statehouse press corps at the moment.

MS: He is.

JM: He now by himself, and he doesn't even really—he was covering the Texas redistricting controversy because he's now a reporter for a five-state region.

MS: It's not even just Kansas.

JM: He's not devoted to covering Kansas anymore. It could be Oklahoma, Texas, and the reason for that is because newspapers are retrenching. They can't afford the wire service anymore. The AP has fewer clients. So imagine trying to be a press secretary. How do you even reach a majority of the voting public anymore through the media?

MS: You now have to be able to deal with social media and have those platforms strong so that you're reaching again directly now to the voters. Maybe your block of voters over here, somebody's block of voters over here, that's part of it. The media still plays a role. It's just different. And people are consuming news—you mentioned earlier about your radio show being more like a podcast. Somebody may turn it on at 10:00 tonight.

MM: Sure.

MS: Even though you're live in the morning. The same thing is happening with all news consumption. We're watching it on our phones. We're reading it when we want to. "I see some pop up from the *New York Times*. I don't have time to read it now, but I'll save it for later." We're consuming news as we want to.

Being a press secretary today would be you're not going to have that immediate hit necessarily, and you may have to be watching the news cycle. It's not a twenty-four-hour news cycle anymore.

JM: I want to get back to that. There's a question I want to ask, but Mike [Matson] I know you want to say something here.

MM: It kind of goes back to the comment you made earlier, Jim, about what it looks like on the ground in local communities today. You touched on all the legacy that had come before us with respect to the individuals. One of the things that I'm doing now in this work—in fact, this radio talk show emanated from some conversations that I was having with Ned Seaton, a fourth-generation newspaper publisher in Manhattan.

JM: Trying to figure out how to keep it alive.

MM: And what drove it was this sort of a slowly descending revenue trend line that had kind of gone this way which forced him—and Ned would be the first to admit it—triage. He had to save the ship. So, he slimmed his paper down to eight pages, cut loose Associated Press, laid off a couple of people, and got serious about a conversation he and I have been having as sort of his informal consultant over the years about combining the family-owned newspaper with the family-owned radio stations.

So, I helped him, and we have set up now—I don't think it's a unique circumstance. It might be unique in Kansas, but basically you've got KMAN, the local radio news talk show or talk radio station, that now has a combined newsroom with the [*Manhattan*] *Mercury* [newspaper]. So we

have one pool of human resources, and then you report the news on all these vehicles. There's an AM radio station. There's a hard-copy newspaper. There's social media. There's websites. It's not a unique concept. It's at least one way that we're trying in Manhattan to hang on to that local journalism.

JM: You mentioned earlier, Mike [Matson], when we were not on camera, you mentioned earlier that one of the things you're doing now, you have nine candidates for the Manhattan City—Commission or Council?

MM: Commission.

JM: You're interviewing them individually on the air. There probably aren't very many communities in Kansas that have that kind of an extensive coverage of local races anymore.

MM: I think you're right, and we've heard good things about it, right? That's the advantage of having a has-been like me. You've reached the end of your career. You're trying desperately for semi-retirement, and Ned and I came up with this idea of this talk show. And that was one of the things we wanted to do. We wanted to do two things. We wanted to serve the community at a level that was deeper than any other news media vehicle would allow.

JM: At the local level.

MM: At the local level. The City Commission, the School Board, the Cemetery Board, micro local. That was the journalistic component, but the other one just as important today is we needed to sell it. Right? We needed to get some revenue for this thing because that's the only way that these for profit systems are going to survive.

So, we were able to do that, and again, I don't know if it's a model for others because you won't find a lot of family-owned radio stations and family-owned newspapers in the same community.

JM: Yes. Many of those radio stations have been bought up by conglomerates from coast to coast. People who own them only care about the revenue stream. They could care less about what kind of coverage you're doing of local news unless they're assured that that's going to make them more money.

MM: Fair, yes.

JM: I did want to go back to something. I don't want to get too deep in the weeds, but I think this is an important point. Mike [Swenson], you mentioned in today's world if you're serving in this press role for any elected official, yes, you still have traditional reporters to deal with, although many fewer of them, but you really do have to be knowledgeable about how to use social media platforms.

MS: Yes.

JM: I know as a press secretary, this wasn't always comfortable for you, but just think about this for a second. You're trying to get your message out, but you had to push it through an editorial filter that you didn't control, newspaper, radio, television. They had editorial mechanisms in place. They were going to report the news as they saw fit, and some of your message would get through. Some of it might not.

In today's world, you can go through that social media platform and you can exclusively control—you don't have to worry about an editorial filter.

MS: Exactly.

JM: I'm not sure that's better for the consuming public.

MS: No, it's not because again I think that's where we get into this camp mode. We're deeper and deeper into our camps because at the end of the day, I don't really care—I need to get enough votes to win the next election, and I know that I've got so many over here that totally agree with me. I've got so many over here that don't totally agree. There might be a few still in the middle. So, we're going to focus on these people.

JM: We're going to keep these people happy. How do we pick these people off?

MS: How do we talk enough to these people to make them think that we're the better—but to your point, yes, now I'm talking direct to a voter as opposed to having it filtered by a reporter.

JM: I know people think of the media as monolithic. If you talk about it in those global terms, I can see the rationale for that, but it isn't. And we know, as you mentioned before, you would make the rounds. What's this reporter interested in? What's this publication interested in? You had to know the territory, so to speak, in order to be effective in your job.

But that editorial filter, people don't understand that there was a real process behind putting out a newspaper, putting on a television news program. You had people questioning reporters about the veracity of what they were reporting. "Are you sure this is correct? Are you sure you have this right?" That filter is largely gone.

MS: It's gone, yes.

MM: And I think part of the challenge that we face is this notion of the vehicles. Social media is not designed to be a journalistic sort of vehicle in the way that we think of it, right? I used to preach, even into the digital age, when I'd speak to groups, and people would ask me about it, I would say, "Find organs that you can trust and stick with them." I'm not sure that I can give that advice with a straight face today because I'm not sure that there's so many.

JM: I think that's good advice, but I think it's a bit idealistic.

MM: I agree, and I think part of the challenge we face is you find something that you like. It requires of the news consumer a lot of time and a lot of energy, and you have to be committed to it because if you're just going to go surf and you're going to surf your smartphone, you're going to find stuff—especially now with AI. You're going to find organs that look legitimate, but they're just scraping other journalistic sources and AI-ing it out there, and it's not always accurate.

JM: I don't know how many people start the process by saying, "I want to search for a reliable source of news." I think unfortunately the mindset is, "I'm going to find a source of information that already confirms what I think."

MM: Agreed.

JM: And I think camps is what we're talking about. Think about this. We're sitting in William Allen White's home in Emporia steeped with history. Everywhere you look in this place, the dining room table, there are portraits of the presidents of the United States who dined here with the editor of the Emporia Kansas Gazette. He had a national voice.

We're sitting here in his home. I wonder, you can't just rail against change because that's ridiculous. Change is always going to happen. Some of it's going to be good, and some of it's going to be bad. But in the context that we've been discussing, I wonder what he would think about today's media environment.

MS: He likely wouldn't recognize it.

JM: Yeah.

MS: I should be more steeped in history than I am perhaps, but it's wondering what the change was that he was experiencing. So, as the editor of a small-town newspaper—

JM: A Republican newspaper.

MS: A Republican who became a national player.

JM: Kansas towns had a Democratic [paper], many of them, and a Republican newspaper.

MS: Radio was probably coming into play.

JM: That's right.

MS: To your point, there's always going to be change. It's up to all of us who are dealing with it at the time to figure out how to best manage it.

JM: It's interesting . . . you bring that up. I just recently rewatched Ken Burns's documentary series on the Roosevelts. It occurs to me in this moment that Franklin Roosevelt's Fireside Chat was early social media.

MM: Exactly.

JM: He went directly to the public, no filter.

MS: Exactly right. No filter, no.

JM: So, again, you can't demonize all of this.

MS: Yes. Social media has a very good side to it, too, in terms of being able to communicate facts to people in times of emergency. It's a quicker way. You don't have to depend on just media. We get our Amber alerts on our phone now. We get storm alerts on our phones now. So, there's good use of technology that is also—as usual, there's things that we would rather didn't happen.

MM: I tend to agree. I think if William Allen White were sitting here today, he would recognize that it's a different time. It's a different culture. It doesn't mean that today's is wrong and that his was right. It's just that was then, this is now. You can make a case that every period, every epic, every generation has different challenges to deal with in every sort of aspect of society. Journalism and news-gathering is one of them. It's the one that we have sort of built our careers on, have been involved with, and are most deeply involved with. That's the subject of this interview and this conversation.

I think he wouldn't recognize it, as Mike said, but he would probably also recognize that, "Well, you know, it's a different time." It's incumbent upon us and consumers of today's journalism to make sure that they find what they want and that it's truthful and accurate.

MS: And he probably would have been eventually like Ned Seaton and say, “Wait a minute. There’s a radio station in town now.”

MM: Exactly.

MS: “Maybe we should”—I think it’s—

JM: KVOE.

MS: KVOE.

MM: The Voice of Emporia.

MS: That direct communication can be a great thing when it’s handled right. But when you’re dealing with falsehoods and stuff, then we know that that’s not good.

JM: Looking back at your time, getting back in the way-back machine, going all the way back to Carlin, Graves, is there anything in particular that stands out in your mind about working for either guy, not necessarily an anecdote or something like that, but they were different kinds of people. You’re still in contact with Bill, and you’re still in contact with John, right?

MS: Yes.

MM: Sure. I think of Bill Graves as sort of the model for what you want in a public servant. He grew up in Salina. He grew up with his family’s trucking business. His father and his uncles learned logistics in the war.

JM: High and tight.

MM: Came back to Salina, started a trucking company, became successful. He had every intention of taking over the company from his father. That was his whole life as a young man. Then when his father sold the company, all of a sudden, no future. So, then it was, he’ll tell the story of he was working on an MBA at KU, and his father called him one day and said, “Son, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is you’re set for life. The bad news is you have no future.” And he will say, “Well, I did what a lot of young men do when they don’t have a future.”

But he was also then surrounded by mentors—Gary Sherrer in high school.

JM: Gary Sherrer was an important one, right.

MM: Coaches, others. His message to him was basically, “To those whom much is given, much is expected.”

JM: And just for the—Gary Sherrer was a teacher.

MM: He’s was the governor’s high school debate teacher, and he later went to work for the Graves truck line.

JM: When Governor Graves was in office, Gary was his commerce secretary.

MM: Correct. They had a relationship that stemmed from when the governor was in high school. He got into public service. He got into politics for all the right reasons. He didn’t have to do it, but he felt like he needed to give back.

JM: Jack Brier was probably a mentor, too.

MM: He was a huge part of that. So, when I think of Bill Graves as a governor, he ran in ’94. He was re-elected in ’98 and he was done. He didn’t want to run for anything else. He didn’t want to run for the Senate. He didn’t want to run for President. He was done with politics, and his argument was “I have served my two terms. That is what I’m constitutionally allowed in Kansas. Let’s give somebody else who has some ideas. Let’s get them in here.”

I so admired that. I had the opportunity to go to work for other politicians after Graves, but none of them ever measured up in terms of that value and what I saw in him. It’s not that he’s alone. It’s not that he’s unique. There’s a lot of others that do that, but that’s what attracted me to him, and that’s what I think about when I think about Bill Graves.

JM: I don’t want to pretend like I’m an academic, but if you go back to Plato’s *Republic*, the Greek philosopher, you talk about the ideal form of governance. He was always very much in favor of the reluctant candidate, somebody who had to be talked into it who did it out of a sense of duty, not because they were furthering just runaway ambition.

MM: Exactly.

JM: I think Graves hit the mold there. John Carlin, a very different person, grew up on a small dairy farm in Smolan, Kansas.

MS: Exactly, and I think that is what forms him is he grew up a dairy farmer. That means you’re up at 4 AM every morning. His dad had the farm, and then he took it over.

JM: Particularly if you had his father who is a taskmaster.

MS: Exactly. So, here’s a guy who’s not afraid of hard work and doing it every day. He gets into politics because he answered an ad. The Democratic candidate in a House race in Smolan, which is just south of Salina quit the race. The Democratic Party put an ad out, “We need a candidate.” He answered the ad.

He lost his first election by about 500 votes. Two years later, he ran again.

JM: That sounds just like him. One defeat is not going to keep him—

MS: No, no. And he defeated Gary Sherrer.

MM: There you go.

MS: Governor Graves’s debate coach.

MM: The circle gets small.

JM: Isn’t Kansas wonderful? What was it? One or two degrees of separation almost—

MS: And he becomes a member of the House. Eight years later, he’s elected governor. In that process, he worked hard. He took on every assignment the minority party at the time, the Democratic Party, would hand him, and they kept adding seats every year.

JM: And he became speaker.

MS: Yes, in 1976, the Democrats for the first time since 1912, were going to elect a Democrat as speaker of the House. And John Carlin was the minority leader, and he waltzed right in to be speaker because he’d built great relationships with the people. He’d been working hard for the

caucus, and he built up a lot of relationships. The people you mentioned for John, it was Pat Hurley. It was Fred Weaver. It was George Wingert. It was people like that—

JM: Pat Hurley, a legislator from Leavenworth who was a really smart, strategic guy.

MS: Fred Weaver from Baxter Springs.

JM: George Wingert from Ottawa. Fred Weaver than became minority leader of Baxter Springs.

MS: Yes.

JM: A great story about Fred—just permit me one second.

MS: Sure.

JM: I just love this. This is Fred Weaver. I'm working for Jim Slattery. The Second [Congressional] District expands from northeast Kansas all the way to the border in southeast Kansas. We're trying to get to know the territory. We're driving down to Galena, Kansas, Fred's territory. And Jim's on one of those early bag phones. You know you plug it in the cigarette lighter on the phone, and Fred's briefing him on what to expect.

And Fred asks him, I can't hear this, but Fred asks him if Jim McLean is with you in the van. I see Slattery says, "Uh huh." Fred asks, "Is he wearing shoes with tassels on them?" And Slattery says, "Uh huh." Fred said, "Tell him he can't get out of the van in Galena, Kansas with tasseled loafers on.

MS: That's Fred.

MM: Here's another story. I ran into Mike Hayden a couple of weeks ago at lunch at a Lawrence restaurant. I reminded him that in the 1990 campaign when he was seeking re-election, we were out there with a satellite truck in Beloit, Kansas, covering the campaign. I'm standing there, getting ready to go live at 6:00, and the lights are shining. I put a little pancake on, right, just because I don't want shining on the forehead, and Hayden's standing there, getting ready to interview him, and Hayden says, "I can't do it. You do it. You might not want to do that." Say it in Mike Hayden. [in a growly voice] "You might not want to do that."

JM: [in a growly voice] "First off."

MM: "First off." Sure enough, a pickup drives by. "We don't wear makeup in Beloit, Kansas." You've got to know the territory.

MS: I think what forms John Carlin is the fact that he's a hard worker. I think the other thing that I learned from him was that he was not afraid to hire people who were smarter than him. And he's a smart guy.

JM: He had a great staff. I'm married to one of them.

MS: Exactly. I tell you what was great about it. In the first six weeks, I'm assistant press secretary, we'd have weekly staff meetings in the governor's office. We'd just get in there. You go through the issues at hand or whatever. I'd be sitting there going, "What am I doing in this room. There's no way I should be in this room."

JM: Holsteen, Millstein.

MS: Yes, and Pat Hurley's in there and Mike Lennen who was secretary of revenue at the time. A smart group of people. But what you learned is that with John Carlin, he's going to listen to the advice.

JM: That's what I've always heard about him.

MS: He's going to listen to advice. Now he will make the decision, but he wanted people. He wanted that interaction. He wanted to hear—he didn't want yes people.

JM: He wanted people to argue it out in front of him.

MS: In front of him. "Make sure I hear both sides or three sides, whatever there is." I took that with me when I started hiring people in the PR firm. "I want to hire people smarter than me. If I hire people smarter than me, we're going to go far." And he's a smart guy, but I think he had that attitude of "I want to make sure I put the best and brightest around me."

JM: I think that's a really important hallmark for a person in public service to want everybody's input before making the most informed decision he or she can possibly make. That's a good attribute to have, and you're going to jump in with something similar?

MM: I was going to say it's a terrific attribute of leadership. You find it in effective leaders. They surround themselves with people who are smarter than them, and they're humble enough to recognize it.

JM: And they seek out people who might have something else to add to the conversation and then factor that in as well. You learned that at the Leadership Center.

MM: Exactly.

JM: Ed O'Malley. Well, I can't tell you how much fun it's been talking to both of you.

MS: It's been great. Thank you for the opportunity.

MM: Thank you for the invitation.

JM: Thank you, and as a closing note here, I just want to say we're sitting here at Red Rocks, William Allen White's home in Emporia, Kansas. For anybody who might be interested, who might see this someday, this house is open essentially from mid-April to mid-October, 10 in the morning until 5 in the evening, Wednesday through Saturday. It is definitely worth—if you're ever in the area, there's some great places to eat downtown. It's definitely worth a stop just to see this place.

MS: Absolutely.

MM: If you're a Kansan, it's a place to visit.

JM: Again, thanks to both of you.

MS: Thanks, Jim.

MM: Thank you.

[End of File]

