

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project board, and a mostly former reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is September 11, 2025. We're at public radio station KCUR in Kansas City to interview Steve Kraske. Steve is the host of "Up to Date," a daily talk show here on KCUR, a show that he created more than twenty years ago. He's also a former political reporter and columnist for *The Kansas City Star*. For several of his more than thirty years at the *Star*, he was stationed at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka. In addition to his radio show, Steve teaches communication and journalism at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others who spent their careers informing the public about state and local policy making. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves the oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. Our videographer is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann. Welcome, Steve.

Steve Kraske: Jim.

JM: Thanks a lot for being here.

SK: Good to be here. Thanks for having me.

JM: I really appreciate it. I've known you for quite a while, but I read your resume, and one thing I didn't know was that you're not from these parts.

SK: I'm not from these parts.

JM: The University of Wisconsin, right?

SK: That's right, born in Detroit, the Midwest, and Wisconsin for school.

JM: I can almost hear the trace of a Wisconsin accent in there.

SK: A little bit.

JM: A little bit, kind of clipped.

SK: Yes.

JM: Then you cut your teeth journalistically in Illinois and Iowa at newspapers before you made your way to *The Kansas City Star*.

SK: That's right.

JM: Talk to me about how all that happened.

SK: Well, in those days, you know, some things don't change in journalism, Jim. The way to get ahead into a big media outfit is to work your way up through smaller media outfits, and that was certainly the case when I came of age. We were talking—I got into journalism, started out my career right in the wake of Woodward and Bernstein and Watergate when everybody wanted to be a reporter all of a sudden. So, the competition for jobs was simply through the roof. To get to a big-city paper like *The Kansas City Star* where I wanted to be, you had to just work your way up.

So, I went to Freeport, Illinois. I went to Dubuque, Iowa before a slot in Kansas City opened up. And even when I came to Kansas City, the job they offered me wasn't what I wanted to do. It was covering police. I had little to no interest in it, but a buddy of mine who was working in Kansas City said it's a great beat. There's a lot of going on. Crime in Kansas City, can you imagine?

JM: No.

SK: So, I took it, and it was a great beat. A couple of years later, I was covering the Missouri Statehouse, and two years later, covering Kansas.

JM: Do you know what's become of the papers in Illinois and Iowa? Are they still thriving?

SK: Thriving might be a stretch. I don't know. I know my old paper in Freeport, I went back a few years ago, it's no longer in the building it was in when I was there. It's in some little cubbyhole office in a tower. The *Telegraph Herald* is still there, but it's shrunken compared to what it was when I was there, much like *The Kansas City Star*, which is a shadow of its former self.

JM: We're going to talk about that, I think.

SK: Yes.

JM: In due course. So, you're at the *Star*, and you're covering the police beat.

SK: Yes.

JM: For what? A couple of years?

SK: A couple of years.

JM: Missouri first, [Jefferson] City first, before Topeka, right?

SK: Yes, a job opened up. That's what I wanted to do, and I leaped at it. I didn't know anything about Missouri politics or its government. But I went down in January of '88 and just immersed myself in that world and loved it. Then when the two papers [*Kansas City Times* and *Kansas City Star*] merged, I joined John Petterson and the *Star*'s Topeka bureau over at the Capitol.

JM: Let's take a moment to talk about John.

SK: Yes.

JM: He was on my list of things that I wanted to talk to you about. John Petterson, *The Kansas City Star*, Statehouse reporter, worked with you.

SK: Yes.

JM: Before he went to the *Star*, he had been at *The Topeka Capital-Journal* where his father had worked.

SK: That's right.

JM: And then *The Wichita Eagle*. He was kind of an institution in Topeka.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: One of the greats. Unfortunately, sadly, he passed away not all that long ago.

SK: Yes.

JM: So, we're not going to have a chance to interview him for this series. So, let's talk about him for a second. What do you remember about John?

SK: Well, he was part of that troika of veteran reporters in the Statehouse when I first came. Along with Lew Ferguson and Roger Myers from the *Cap-Journal* [*Topeka Capital-Journal*], there was John Petterson. Those guys had been around for decades when I arrived and just had the building wired in a way that you could only dream of as a young reporter.

But the thing I will always remember about John, he was a terrific journalist, but maybe even better a human being.

JM: He was.

SK: He was just a great man and could have been threatened by the young guy coming in, but we just got along from Day One. We had a great relationship, and he taught me a lot about who to talk to and where to go to get information in that building. He was kind of a big guy. I remember once he asked me if I played racquetball, and I said, "Sure." I'm thinking to myself, thought bubble, "I'm going to clean the court with this guy." We went to the Y just down the street, and he would plop himself in the middle of that court, and he'd just kick my behind every—it was humbling. We laughed about it for years.

He came up to Minnesota once and met my parents. We just had that kind of a relationship. He struggled in his final years—we just had a get-together. You couldn't come. Former Statehouse reporters that got together in Lawrence to remember him.

JM: Yes, I regret that.

SK: A lot of people came. It was a neat event. He's one of those people you'll miss for the rest of your life.

JM: He was beloved. When you had this get-together, I remember when you were organizing it. You had to postpone it a couple of times because of the weather, but people wanted to be there.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: He was a big guy, and he was interesting because he was rumored to have the best sources in the Statehouse.

SK: I think that's probably true. I borrowed a lot of them.

JM: He had an easygoing manner.

SK: Yes.

JM: He was aggressive, but it didn't appear that he was ever in a hurry to do anything.

SK: That's right. Our office was 132 North in the Statehouse right by the men's and women's restrooms, which was perfect for John because the door was always open. If he needed a source, they were going to wind up in one of those two rooms.

JM: Catch people coming and going.

SK: People would stop because he was so easy to talk to. He didn't grill people, but he got the information he needed for the work he was doing. I just loved the guy.

JM: I can remember still, he'd be sitting there with his notebook open, kind of chewing on his pen. He kind of had this bemused look on his face.

SK: Yes.

JM: When he was talking to somebody, he maintained eye contact. He wasn't buried in his notebook taking notes, but he would remember stuff later, write it down.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: He was a really good guy. I regret that we didn't have the opportunity to talk to him because—

SK: He would have been great.

JM: He would have been great. You talked about the Old Guard in those days: John Petterson, Roger Myers, and Lew Ferguson is another great who we're not going to have a chance to talk to.

SK: Of course, not.

JM: Of the Associated Press. He headed that bureau. He came from your part of the country.

SK: Yes.

JM: Minnesota.

SK: Minnesota. He covered the Vikings football team.

JM: He was a sports reporter.

SK: Yes.

JM: Then he became the Statehouse, the bureau chief for the [Associated Press] AP in Topeka and really was the dean of the Statehouse reporting corps.

SK: Yes.

JM: Again, you couldn't meet a nicer guy.

SK: He and I would drive oftentimes together out to Russell, Kansas to cover one [U.S. Senator] Bob Dole event or another. I always wanted to ride with Lew because he had these stories about the old Minnesota Vikings football teams that I grew up with when I was living in Minnesota. He just had great stories. We would laugh and talk the whole way. We'd be in Russell before you knew it.

JM: And he would tell them in his Oklahoma colloquial way.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: The chicken on the June bug and all that stuff.

SK: Yes.

JM: Quicker than a chicken on a June bug.

SK: That's exactly right. He was great people, too.

JM: When I got back to the Statehouse in the nineties, I worked alongside Roger Myers. It was at the tail end of his career then. You talk about a lot of institutional memory.

SK: Yes. I've got to tell you with the cameras on, you were great. The Kansas News Service, I remember going to the Statehouse listening to your stories. You would do those extended stories many mornings of the week. It was terrific for me as a young reporter, a new reporter to the Statehouse to begin to get the lay of the land. Your stories were terrific. It was a great education hearing you do that.

JM: That's really nice of you to say, Steve. I really enjoyed our working career together here at KCUR later when it was the tail end of my career.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: Let's talk about—you were at the *Star*, and you were in Topeka.

SK: Right.

JM: In those days, it seemed that time passed—it's hard to reflect back on it. You were there maybe four years at the Statehouse.

SK: Yes.

JM: You were at the paper for more than thirty, and you were their main political reporter.

SK: Right.

JM: You had a column and very influential. Everybody read your stuff, both Missouri and Kansas. But your time at the Statehouse physically was relatively brief working with John.

SK: Yes.

JM: Remind me—you were there when? What was going on at the Statehouse? That was I think 1994.

SK: I arrived in 1990.

JM: That was when the gubernatorial race was between—

SK: [Governor Mike] Hayden and [State Treasurer, Joan] Finney.

JM: Hayden and Finney, right.

SK: Governor Hayden was struggling, and one of my first interviews in the Statehouse was in Governor Hayden's office to talk to him about what he was up against. He was just really struggling because of the reappraisal of property, the tax stuff, and really in trouble for re-election. The Democrats had several people they were looking at, including John Carlin and Joan Finney, of course. I think Fred Phelps ran.

JM: He ran, yes.

SK: He ran that year as well. It was a stunner that Joan Finney came out of that primary, a woman who was fascinating in the sense that far from your typical politician, nothing ordinary about her. She always claimed a very intense connection with "the people." I guess she did enough to win that primary. And then when she won that night in the primary, I remember she was at the old Jayhawk Tower Hotel. The people there, her supporters, were just ecstatic. They were just beside themselves that she had pulled this thing off. There was a feeling that night that because her opponent was Mike Hayden, who had his own tough primary that year against Nestor Weigand, the real estate guy from Wichita, that Joan Finney was going to be able to pull this thing off in November. That was just the feeling that was in the air that night that proved to be prophetic.

She was not a typical politician. She struggled as governor almost from Day One in terms of mainly her relationships with lawmakers who were used to having things done in certain ways, and she wanted to do them in different ways, and it just never worked. Republicans who were in the majority, of course, really worked to make sure she wasn't going to be sticking around very long.

JM: She probably didn't have much of a policy agenda in the traditional sense, right? She had been state treasurer for many, many years. She was a Republican, had worked for Senator Frank Carlson before changing parties.

SK: That's right.

JM: And had been treasurer for a long time. She had great statewide name recognition among people who paid attention to politics.

SK: Right.

JM: And she had this knack for never forgetting a face or a name.

SK: That's right. Retail politics.

JM: In terms of retail politics, she was very good at it.

SK: One of her big pushes was for something called initiative and referendum, which the state of Missouri has. I was a little bit familiar with it, letting the people vote on issues outside of the legislature. It's not a bad policy, and it's fundamentally changed Missouri over the years because

that system is in place. She wanted that to get done. The legislature, of course, it's taking power away from them in a sense. They weren't going to let that happen. One of her major initiatives never got very far at all.

JM: Initiative and referendum, as you mentioned, they have it in Missouri, it got a bad name in California because of the number of ballot initiatives there were each and every election year. As it stands, the Kansas legislature is the only entity that can put questions on the ballot, constitutional questions.

SK: That's right.

JM: And other things. And she wanted the people to have direct access to the law-making process.

SK: Yes.

JM: Ironically, as we speak today here in Missouri, lawmakers here are trying essentially to do away with initiative and referendum, if I understand it correctly.

SK: That's exactly right. Very conservative Republicans don't like the legalization of marijuana. They don't like the expansion of Medicaid, and now abortion is being bandied about through that process. So, they want to get rid of it. You can argue that maybe it's a little too easy in Missouri to get that stuff, change the state constitution, just a 50 percent vote. You can tinker with that percentage if you want, but under Governor Kehoe's plan, it would all but go away. You're right.

JM: So, Governor Finney, her daughter was her chief of staff.

SK: That's right. Mary Holladay.

JM: What was your relationship like with Governor Finney? Do you remember?

SK: It was really good to begin with. I had covered her campaign. I was the reporter assigned to her campaign. I did a big profile of her. I remember one day just to get more color for the story, I showed up at her home in Topeka like at 7:00 a.m., and we went for a jog together. She was known for going out for early morning runs.

Listen, in fairness to her, she was older even at that point in her life, and her idea of jogging was my equivalent of a slow walk. I sort of wondered if she really went on these runs or this was part of her image-building thing. But she was a delight to be with, again connecting with people everywhere you went.

The first number of months I was with her, it was all very good. I had great access. I was with her in her home on election night and watched what happened in her home that evening.

JM: You and Joan and Spencer.

SK: Spencer, her husband, and the family and watching the people who were showing up that night was interesting. Then within a few months though, Republicans really began to hit her hard. We were reporting those stories. She and her governor team began to get more and more disenchanted with my less-than-glowing coverage, and some of that access began to fade away.

JM: She took it personally.

SK: She took it personally.

JM: That was a personality trait of her as well.

SK: That's right. She wasn't used to that intense kind of coverage. She didn't get that as a state treasurer.

JM: I used to see her at the driving range. She was an interesting person, certainly.

SK: Very interesting.

JM: Also in your tenure later on, this didn't happen very often in Topeka, but the Democrats controlled the Kansas House of Representatives.

SK: That's right. It was an amazing thing. On the night Joan Finney won, Democrats managed to eke out like a 63-62 majority.

JM: So, it was that election?

SK: That election, 1991 going to 1992, the first couple of years of Finney's administration. Marvin Barkis, the longtime minority leader for the Democrats, became the speaker, and again—I used the word "ecstatic" before but election night, Democrats just—it's only happened like three or four times in state history.

JM: A couple of times maybe.

SK: A couple of times. Back in the late seventies was the other time with [Rep. Jim] Slattery and [Rep. John] Carlin.

JM: John Carlin.

SK: And those guys. So, it happens again, and the Democrats suddenly are in charge.

JM: Nominally in charge.

SK: Nominally in charge, but it was interesting. They made a great choice of an issue set to push forward, an issue set that even Republicans in theory could get on board with, which was

children's issues, focusing on their welfare in Kansas going forward. Again, 63-62, no breathing room there, but an interesting moment in state politics.

JM: And those were the days when there was a substantial number of traditional—we can attach many labels, but traditional, moderate Republicans—

SK: Absolutely.

JM: In the Kansas legislature.

SK: Yes.

JM: Our videographer, Dave Heinemann, included in that number. So, you could build coalitions as a Democratic governor with a significant portion of the House and Senate in those days, and you could govern kind of right down the middle.

SK: Right. It's amazing to think how different it is today—every Republican being almost to the far right of the spectrum. But you're absolutely right. They said for a number of years there were three political parties in Kansas: Democrats, Moderate Republicans, and Conservative Republicans, and governors could monkey with those coalitions to get what they needed.

JM: In those days though, that's when the conservative faction was just starting to emerge.

SK: Just starting.

JM: Do you remember any of the characters? I mean, David Miller from [Eudora]. They were called the Cowboys, the Rebels.

SK: The Rebels. They were called the Rebels, and Kerry Patrick was one of them.

JM: From Leawood, right?

SK: From Leawood. Tim Shallenburger, hard to believe, now in the State Senate, still in the State Senate, was a member of that group as well. They were really seen as oddballs, out of step with the rest of the state, out of step with their own party. We didn't take them all that seriously. There were a dozen of them, ten of them. I don't know what the number was. But it was the first sign of things beginning to change.

I remember clearly a couple of years, as Marvin Barkis was ending his term as speaker in 1993, we're going into the 1994 elections, he showed up one night in October in our office in the Statehouse. He came in at 6:00 at night. John and I were still there. He's saying, "You know, I'm not feeling really good about this election. I'm going home to Louisburg," an eastern part of the state, "I'm a little worried." And we were just, "Oh, Marvin, you're the speaker of the House. Speakers of the House always win re-election. You've got nothing to worry about."

And then you fast forward to election night three or four weeks later in the *Star* newsroom. It was like a rocket ship going around the room. The word came that Marvin Barkis had been upset by a rookie named Jene Vickrey out of Louisburg. The paper sent me down to Louisburg the next day to find out what in the world had happened down there. It was an astonishing upset for a speaker of the House to be defeated, but it was a sign of the insurgent nature and power of that conservative Republican voice in the state.

JM: It was also a sign that politics in Kansas like many other places was being nationalized.

SK: That's right.

JM: That was the year of Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America.

SK: That's right.

JM: With Republican sweeps across the country. Slattery ran for governor that year. Everybody thought Jim Slattery, he looked like a Kennedy.

SK: Yes, he did.

JM: He had this great rhetorical ability, and people had been waiting for him to run for governor for a long time, right? And he loses to Bill Graves.

SK: He got crushed.

JM: He got crushed by Bill Graves. He had turned down a chance to run the year that Joan Finney ran.

SK: I was just going to say Jim Slattery's timing was just off. He would have been governor I think if he had run in 1990. He took a flyer on it. John Carlin ran in his stead in a sense.

JM: There's that famous meeting in Topeka, did you cover that? When Carlin and Slattery met at—we're throwing a lot of names around here, but John Bottenberg was a lobbyist in Topeka for a long time.

SK: They get together and talk.

JM: And Carlin kind of stared him down, and Slattery didn't run, and John Carlin did. John then lost to Joan Finney in the primary. The rest, as they say, is history.

SK: And you wonder if Jim Slattery had run and won that election, what his national trajectory might have been. He was maybe that close from national office one day.

JM: But '94, he did run for governor, and as you mentioned, he got beat handily by Bill Graves, a nice, nice guy.

SK: A nice guy.

JM: I remember still the editorials, “the empty suit.” He didn’t have much of a record. He’d been secretary of state.

SK: That’s right.

JM: He was kind of a clean slate, which was a real advantage to him, that and the “R” by his name.

SK: He had maybe one of the best campaign slogans I’ve ever heard. “Load them high and tight.” He came from a trucking family in Salina, and playing off that heritage from his own family. If I’m remembering a slogan this many years later, you know it must have been good because it carried him.

JM: Yes, it showed him packing the trailer of a truck.

SK: That’s right.

JM: I’m not sure how often he really did that.

SK: I’m not sure either.

JM: But it was an effective ad.

SK: It worked.

JM: That was interesting. You were there at that turning point, and then you were a columnist. As I mentioned before, you were a very influential columnist for years. You watched that change over the years in Kansas.

SK: Yes.

JM: And ’94 was clearly the point of demarcation.

SK: Yes. It’s the line, and Bill Graves wins, very much from the moderate, traditional wing of the party in the mold of a [US Senator Nancy] Kassebaum or a Bob Dole, and that’s who ran the state for eight years. But I think, I’m trying to think real quick, I think that’s the last moderate Republican we’ve had in office since that time. Check me here. There’s [Governor Kathleen] Sebelius and then [Governor Sam] Brownback—I think it is.

JM: Well, [Mark] Parkinson was governor, but he took—

SK: He switched over.

JM: He was lieutenant governor.

SK: Switched parties.

JM: He'd been chair of the state Republican party and then joined Sebelius on the Democratic ticket.

SK: That's right.

JM: But you're right. Even four years into Graves's two terms, at the end of his first term, David Miller challenged him in a Republican primary. And you had the ascendancy of Phill Kline.

SK: That's right.

JM: Phill Kline won the attorney general's race that year much to the surprise—things were changing.

SK: Things were changing even to the point where we had this awkward moment at the 1996 Republican National Convention. It was in San Diego; I was there. There was this big sort of fight over who was going to put Bob Dole—I hope I have these facts right—over the top for the nomination. You reserved that for the home state. It's Kansas, obviously. You'd think the governor would have that prerogative, that privilege, but David Miller was there and wanted a piece of that. If memory serves, they sort of shared that announcement together that night in San Diego in this historic moment for Bob Dole.

JM: That's right. When he ran for president, obviously.

SK: When he ran for president.

JM: So, you were at the *Star* for more than 30 years, right?

SK: More than 30 years -- 33, but who's counting?

JM: We're looking back, right. What else do you remember from your time at the *Star*? You covered a wide swath of the political events in Kansas and Missouri over that time.

SK: Yes, I remember anyone who covered Kansas during those years remembers working with Bob Dole and what that was like and how difficult it was sometimes to work with he and his people. Bob Dole was tough, no nonsense, and was really playing to a national stage. The hometown reporters weren't really high on his agenda. His people, his lieutenants and sergeants underneath him all treated us sort of the same. We were just sort of like dog meat. If we got a few minutes—

JM: Local media.

SK: Local media. If we got a few minutes with the senator, we were being gifted a great thing. There was the whole thing with Dole and watching his career and going to Russell quite a bit, and then watching the rise as we said of the conservative movement in the state that culminated at least to this point with the election of Sam Brownback a number of years later, watching his governorship rise and then crash in a dramatic way, in a way I'd never seen before. So, that was kind of an interesting whole thing to watch.

Then watching today [Governor] Laura Kelly serve in what I think has been a fairly successful administration because she's figured out a way to work with the Republican leadership of the state, and I think that's a hard trick to pull off. You've just got to tip your cap to her. I think she's managed it in a lot of ways. All those people still speak to each other after all of these years. That's a tough thing to do.

JM: She's certainly managed to co-exist.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: And get some things done.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: She's managed the state through a really tough time, through COVID.

SK: Yes.

JM: That was pretty tough on her administration at the time. There was a lot of controversy everywhere across the country and particularly in Kansas. She had a pretty aggressive approach to it. Lee Norman who was her Secretary of Health and Environment took an aggressive approach initially.

SK: Yes.

JM: That really created some partisan issues.

SK: Yes. The other thing that really strikes me about Kansas that's so unique, it's almost weird. You go back to the mid-1960s, and the gubernatorial administrations have shifted steadily and regularly between Republican [R] and Democrat [D] every four or eight years without any exception. Obviously, we're now ending eight years of a Democrat. The history would suggest a Republican's going to win going forward.

And that to me is, it says a lot about the state, about the more moderate tone of the state. You look at a state like Missouri right now, which I also covered for many years, has swung so far hard right right now. You can't envision a day where Democrats will ever get it back.

JM: Missouri used to be more of a Democratic state.

SK: It was the great presidential bellwether state, but those days are gone. But Kansas has remained true to this R-D, R-D sort of split with its governors going back so many decades. It does say something powerful about the politics of this state.

JM: Kansas left to its own devices cleaves that moderate middle to some degree. It's interesting. Kansas has a reputation of electing Democratic governors in a cyclical way like you say.

SK: Yes.

JM: But they haven't had a US senator, a Democratic senator since the thirties, since Franklin Roosevelt won his first term.

SK: Since the 1930s, the longest streak in the country without having elected a Democrat.

JM: How do you explain that?

SK: I'm not sure.

JM: You're a pundit.

SK: US senators deal with federal issues, national issues. Those issues may be easier to grasp for people who might cleave more to the right in a state like Kansas than do Democrats. Then you also think we haven't had strong US Senate candidates from the Democratic side in a long time. I know there's some pressure on Governor Kelly right now to think about running against [US Senator] Roger Marshall next year. I don't know if that's going to happen or not. We haven't had strong candidates. I think that's been an issue, too.

JM: Yes. We have had strong incumbent senators. You mentioned Bob Dole, Nancy Kassebaum.

SK: Very much so. [US Senator] Pat Roberts.

JM: No Democrat could really conceive of beating Nancy Kassebaum.

SK: No.

JM: She was so popular in the state.

SK: So popular, and Dole was untouchable.

JM: So powerful nationally. So, at least in our careers, and Pat Roberts who—I interviewed Leroy Towns recently. He was Roberts's chief of staff. Roberts had been the Congressman in the 1st District of western Kansas. He followed Keith Sebelius in that role and then went on, of course, to win several terms as a US senator when Nancy Kassebaum stepped down.

SK: Democrats couldn't touch them. I remember it was 1992. Senator Dole is running for his last re-election as a US senator. I was covering the Democratic candidate, a woman everyone has forgotten, speaking of not strong candidates. Her name was Gloria O'Dell.

JM: I remember her.

SK: I sat with her in a parade, in a car with her taking notes. She's waving to people. I'll never forget this. She gets down to a month out from the election. Gloria O'Dell thinks she's taken down the king. She's going to beat Bob Dole. Everyone's telling her she's going to win. She goes and she borrows \$100,000 on her personal account to fund the final weeks of her campaign. She was not a well-off woman financially, and she got beat by twenty, twenty-five points. I think to this day she carries remnants of that debt. It shows up on [Federal Communication Commission] FCC reports, and it's just, you just sort of shake your head. She thought she could beat him. It was just wrong-minded thinking.

JM: If I remember correctly, her crowning moment was at the Democratic National Convention when she took the podium with a bunch of other women who were running for the US Senate. Carol Moseley Braun—

SK: "Year of the Woman" maybe or something.

JM: Yes, "Year the Woman." She stood up there triumphantly and then, as you say, went on to—

SK: She was going to beat the king, and she didn't come close.

JM: Probably the closest the Democrats came in our lifetime was the Bill Roy-[Bob] Dole race early on.

SK: Yes, back in the seventies. That was close.

JM: Maybe that was prescient in the sense that Roy was thought to be ahead in that race until the final week, and then the abortion issue raised its—

SK: Some really nasty politics on the Republican side, smearing Bill Roy as an abortionist or something.

JM: He had been an Air Force doctor.

SK: That's right.

JM: He had done abortions as an Air Force doctor, not many of them.

SK: And the Republicans used that in the final campaign flyers on cars and church parking lots.

JM: Flyers in Catholic churches in Leavenworth and Atchison County and places like that.

SK: It was a desperate attempt and it paid off. Bob Dole squeaked out that election and changed American history.

JM: And Bill Roy had been a Congressman of the Second District for several years, well-thought of, but that was a close race.

SK: A very close race.

JM: But that was probably the last time.

SK: I think that's right.

JM: So, let's shift gears a little bit and talk about your current life. You do a daily talk show here five days a week.

SK: Five days a week.

JM: "Up to Date," 9:00 in the morning. I'll give you a little plug there.

SK: Thank you, sir. 89.3 on your dial.

JM: It's an interesting show. It's topical. You delve into politics and policy issues, both in Missouri and Kansas quite frequently. But there's also a lighter side to it when you talk about movies and food and other cultural things. You said you started that twenty-some years ago, 23 years ago.

SK: 2002, I started. I caught a lucky break. Frank Morris here at KCUR called me up, the news director then called me up, would I consider doing a talk show. I said, "No way. I don't have time, Frank. Thanks for calling."

JM: You were still with the *Star*.

SK: I was at the *Star*. An editor overheard that conversation. He said, "You ought to think about that. It might be an interesting opportunity." So, long story short, I had a chance to start—the *Star* finally blessed the idea, and off I went.

JM: And it's become a mainstay. Is it a grind for you? Do you still enjoy it?

SK: I still enjoy it, absolutely, but it's work, and it's every night, and it's the weekends. I'm preparing for a Bill Kurtis interview on Monday on the show. I'm reading his new book entitled *Whirlwind*. Bill Kurtis has Kansas roots. He became a well-known national broadcaster for CBS and other outlets. He does an NPR show now, "Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!"

So, yes, it's always staying on top of the news. You know, you're a news guy. It's hard for me to walk away from the news. I still want to stay connected to it. I teach at UMKC as well. I teach

journalism, but the show keeps me connected and grounded in that world. It seems like the times are always interesting when you're here in the heartland.

JM: I always enjoyed getting a call from somebody over here saying, "They want you on 'Up to Date' to talk about this and that."

SK: You've been on a bunch.

JM: I try to prepare as best I could. It was always fun for me. You mentioned you also teach journalism. You're at UMKC [The University of Missouri-Kansas City], right?

SK: Yes.

JM: I'm interested in that because some of the conversations we've had with reporters, we've talked about kind of the mechanics of journalism.

SK: Yes.

JM: People, I don't expect them to really know the inner workings of newsrooms and so forth. People have misconceptions about how the newspaper gets assembled and reported and the separation between advertising and reporting and editorial positioning. You were on the editorial board of the *Star* for a while.

SK: I was.

JM: You had that column. Talk a little bit about that separation and the rigorous approach at least in those days and hopefully still at my journalistic outlets because people could talk about the mainstream media, the liberal media, blah, blah, blah.

SK: Right.

JM: What's your assessment of those claims that the mainstream media is inherently biased?

SK: There is something to be said for that, but I think what gets lost in the conversation is how hard newspapers in those days and hopefully still today, mainstream newspapers try hard to remain objective and present both sides. In my day, it got down to the point where editors would count the number of words that you gave the anti-abortion side and the number of words you gave the pro-choice side in any one article. They really wanted those things to be balanced.

Reporters work hard to get it right. You want to scare a reputable reporter to his knees, you're waking up at 3:00 in the morning thinking, "Did I spell that name in the fourth paragraph correctly? Did I get that fact right?" We work really hard to get it right. We fail sometimes. Let's just put that out there. The attempt was to try to get it right.

I try to tell my students that. We do an exercise where we—I'm just doing that right now. They interview me, and they write a little essay about me so I can tell real quickly whether the story is accurate or not. Eighty percent of them get something wrong in the story even after I've explained, "Here's how you try to get it right."

You work hard to get the facts straight, to get it right. It's a laborious, time-intensive, pressure-packed kind of environment, and for some reason, knuckleheads like us sort of like that. I did like it, and I still miss it in some ways, that adrenaline rush you get. That's what we did.

JM: When I worked at the *Capital-Journal*, I used to go through the McDonald's drive-thru line to get a cup of coffee in the morning. In those days, there was a newspaper rack right there adjacent to the drive-thru line. If I had a front page story or two, it was always that moment, "Yes, that's what I did yesterday."

SK: That's what I do. You can account for your time.

JM: Talk about—objectivity is one thing. Balance is another.

SK: Yes.

JM: And balance is what was always—it does seem if you're counting the words, that you give this side versus that side, that's a bit artificial.

SK: Sure.

JM: As you teach journalism today, does that formula—I remember in my History of Journalism class, Calder Pickett at the University of Kansas, he talked about essentially what he called the wire service approach to reporting. In those days, the UPI, AP, there were Democratic newspapers and Republican newspapers. The wire services wanted both to purchase their services. So, they kind of invented that "he said, she said" style of journalism, very balanced, both sides relatively equal in terms of the copy.

SK: Right.

JM: But does that really work today?

SK: Obviously, that model is under enormous pressure right now. The Trump administration, the president himself has put a lot of pressure on the whole idea of objectivity when he says things that aren't true, and they're demonstrably not true. So, you're having the president of the United States say things fairly regularly that aren't accurate or true. Reporters have to point that out. There's a new school of thought that says, "You don't have to balance the story if the one side of the story is false, and the other side to have some validity to it."

JM: So rarely are both sides of a controversial issue equal in terms of how people represent them.

SK: Yes.

JM: The trouble is, reporters have—because newsrooms are hollowing out—reporters have to know enough about what they're covering to differentiate, right? That's hard.

SK: It's hard, and it's hard to write that someone has spoken a falsehood or has lied to the public. That's a tricky thing journalistically. Anyway, the whole idea of objective reporting is under enormous pressure. The mainstream media is staying true to it by and large, but at times when it has to call out the president or anybody else for that matter, you're seeing that happen more and more and more, reporting the president of the United States lied today when he said "x." That's a dramatic departure from where the industry's been for a long time.

JM: Let's talk about RFK Jr., Robert Kennedy Jr., the Secretary of Health [and Human Services]. He will say things—he has lots of opinions. Think about a reporter trying to cover him. You have to know enough about the subject matter, the science of it, the health science.

SK: To distinguish—

JM: To call him out. And in the moment when you're writing a story, that can be very difficult.

SK: Very difficult on deadline. I remember covering a presidential debate, and the paper flies you off to some faraway city. The debate starts at 7:00; your first deadline's at 7:30. You're trying to ascertain, "Was that accurate?" It's very difficult on the fly to do that in real time whether you're a TV broadcaster or a print reporter. The higher premium these days is watching for those falsehoods and trying to catch them and getting your story right even on the first try, the first crack at a debate story. Those stories would bring me to my knees. They were so difficult.

JM: So, you work now for KCUR.

SK: Yes.

JM: A public radio station affiliated with National Public Radio.

SK: That's right.

JM: In the context of what we've been discussing in terms of media bias, there's a school of thought and conservatives and people on the right in politics will constantly criticize NPR and public radio again for being left-leaning.

SK: Right.

JM: What's your perception of that as somebody who goes to work every day in this station and hosts the show? What is your perception about the accuracy of that claim?

SK: Well, the accuracy of the claim, the latest Nielsen numbers for this station show that by eight points, more Republicans listen than Democrats. That surprises a lot of people when you say that to them. Listen, I understand again the argument of bias. I think most of the people who work here probably do lean Democratic.

JM: In their personal politics.

SK: In their personal politics. There are some here who are Republican, but I can just talk about the show that I do. I try really hard to offer up the viewpoints that I think are worthy of being covered, offer all of them to the listeners and let those folks decide what they think is going on here. I try to be just a neutral observer.

JM: But you'll challenge people on the air when it's necessary.

SK: Sure, absolutely, but that's not saying that they're wrong. It's trying to draw them out more, to explain why they're pushing the agenda that they're pushing. That's what I do. I think if you listen to National Public Radio, "All Things Considered," "Morning Edition," whatever your show of choice is, I think you're pretty hard pressed to find blatant examples of bias one way or the other. I think they do a pretty good job of presenting the day's news when they do it each day.

JM: I think that's true, too, when it comes to reporting the actual news of the day, when it comes to politics and public affairs. Absolutely. Take a drink. We're just having a conversation here. On the other hand, some of the cultural issues that NPR chooses to cover may say something about their perception of the audience that's listening to them.

SK: It might.

JM: But it doesn't go into the news part of it. That's one reason why I asked you about the editorial process at newspapers. You need to differentiate. The *Wall Street Journal* has a very conservative editorial page, but the reporting is just straight up.

SK: Right. Absolutely. That's what I always tried to do as a reporter for the *Star*. Trying to explain that idea to students is tricky because their temptation is always to call balls and strikes and say right or wrong. I say, "Just tell people what the speaker said. Just reflect back like a mirror what you think the key points were and keep yourself out of the story." It takes a while, but they start to figure it out.

JM: That's harder today. The media environment has changed so much. It's personality driven today.

SK: That's right.

JM: Much more than it used to be in our day.

SK: That's right.

JM: Reporters, particularly on television, are right in the middle. They're making themselves the story as much as anything. They become personalities.

SK: That's right.

JM: I think that's a dangerous trend to editorialize a bit. You have to walk that line as a radio host.

SK: I was going to say the thinking on my show from Day One has been "You're not the star. The guest is the star." I try to keep, give them the lion share of the time and attention. I think I've tried to do that since I started here.

JM: Go back to your students. You talk about you came into reporting and journalism in the wake of the Watergate crisis.

SK: Right.

JM: Everybody wanted to be Bernstein or Woodward and wanted to do that investigative reporting.

SK: Yes.

JM: You're right. People were flocking to journalism schools in those days. How many of the students in your communication and journalism classes actually want to be reporters?

SK: A pretty slim minority, Jim. There's always in the introduction to journalism class, three, four, five, six out of twenty or twenty-five students. But even when I started teaching 13 years ago, there'd be eight, nine, ten who wanted to do it. I think students aren't dumb. They see that getting a well-paying job in journalism, those prospects have faded a little bit. So, many of them are looking at strat com or whatever.

But what I try to emphasize—

JM: Strat com means strategic communications?

SK: Strategic communications, PR. What I try to emphasize is journalism, the discipline of journalism teaches you how to write concisely with the fewest words possible to get your points, make your points as clearly and succinctly as you can in a very short amount of space. And that skill, that ability to write concisely, that will help you in whatever you are going into in your career.

JM: Witness Ernest Hemingway. He started out as a journalist.

SK: At *The Kansas City Star*.

JM: That's right.

SK: Yes, he was a police reporter at *The Kansas City Star*. Look what happened to him.

JM: That's right. That spare writing style served him well over the years.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: It serves you in a couple of ways. The mental discipline of being able to separate things out, to get it done quickly. It is a discipline that I think can serve you in many different ways.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: That's what I always used to tell people. If you want to be a press secretary or be a corporate PR person, being a reporter for a few years is a really good way to train yourself.

SK: It's a terrific set of skills to have—how to ask questions, how to frame questions, how to think about and frame a news story. What's the most important fact of all these different facts you just came up with to write any one story, to think critically, and sort through all of that. It's a great set of skills to have, and students seem to think so. Almost to my surprise, enrollment is up these days. I didn't expect that, but it's up and up considerably.

JM: Back in our days, the Statehouse press corps in Topeka was a large, robust kind of—just great people.

SK: Terrific. Great people and great reporters, smart people.

JM: A friendly, competitive atmosphere.

SK: Yes. Absolutely.

JM: So, now, again, what's your assessment? Again, you pay attention to public affairs. You have reporters on your show from time to time. What's your assessment of where we are today in terms of "Does the media, newspapers, radio, television, do they have the resources anymore to do the job of keeping track of these policy issues, these political issues at statehouses and city halls across the state?"

SK: No. Not at all. In fact, today in Kansas City, Missouri, a major American city, the 35th biggest market in the country, whatever it is, there was no one assigned full time to cover City Hall in this city anymore to the point where there are actually folks out in the community trying to raise money to change that and to get a full-time reporter based on their—in my day, five, six people full time assigned to City Hall to cover the going-ons down there.

A number of years ago, there were stories in the different journals that look at journalism. Statehouse reporting is disappearing. No one is doing it anymore. Then the States News folks came along and created the *Kansas Reflector* and *The Missouri Independent* and statehouse bureaus across the country. They've sort of changed that dynamic going forward.

But again, in my day, there were two of us at the *Star* assigned full time to the Statehouse, and I think there's one now. The AP used to have three, four, five people during a legislative session. They're down to one or two now, I think.

JM: It's just one. It's John Hanna still.

SK: John Hanna. During the session, I think they still bring in a little more help. It's just not what it used to be. The problem is, officials know they're not being watched like they used to be. The whole idea of good journalism is to keep officials accountable for the actions they take. You worry endlessly that that dynamic is fading away, that people aren't being held accountable to look after the people's best interests in the way they used to be, and that's an enormous loss for our society, for our culture, for our times.

Whether you're a Democrat, whether you're a Republican, it doesn't matter. That work is really important. The founders created the First Amendment for a reason. They recognized the Fourth Estate for being what it is. We need a robust press to keep an eye on people who are elected to do the people's business. So much of that has begun to crumble.

JM: The relationship between reporters and the people that they cover, particularly in an environment like the Statehouse is necessarily adversarial, but that doesn't mean hostile.

SK: Not at all.

JM: I can remember, I trust you had the same experience, you had to guard yourself. You couldn't become really chummy with the people you covered.

SK: Yes.

JM: Nevertheless, it was a friendly environment. There were times of course when people got angry about coverage of something.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: But generally speaking, it was a very collegial kind of a place.

SK: Yes. To your point, back in the forties, fifties, sixties, I think reporters went out with their sources, had lunch, went out to the bar after a day on the floor and had beers together. Those days ended a long time ago, not in our era. There always was a separation there. You didn't become too chummy, chummy with the people that you covered.

But to your point, you could ask them the hard questions. It never devolved into you're taking money out of the people's pocket, accusing people of taking money. In my little hometown of Westwood, Kansas, the issues about development pop up. And when people disagree with the mayor and the City Council, the first reaction is to say, "Well, the mayor favors this development because he's getting paid off by the developer." That's a bad place for our society to be.

JM: We've been conditioned to that.

SK: We've been conditioned now to that, and I don't believe the mayor was on the take with the developer. But that to be the first knee-jerk response when you disagree with your mayor or your member of Congress, that just isn't a good healthy place for anyone to be. I think people need to just sit back and chill a little bit when it comes to how they regard people who do these jobs.

I've always thought you go off to the Statehouse to do that job. You're leaving your family for a few months. You're making a considerable sacrifice to do that work. And in Kansas, you sure as heck ain't getting paid very much to do that work. I've always found 95, 98, 99 percent of the people that I encountered there, I always walked away thinking, "They're there for the right reasons." You could sense they were trying to do whatever they were trying to do because they believed that was in the best interest of the state, and that idea I think has completely evaporated in our culture.

JM: I was going to ask you, that assessment that they were there for the right reasons, does that stem from your time actually at the Statehouse?

SK: Yes.

JM: Is it the same today, do you think?

SK: I'm not as familiar today, but in those days, you knew the legislators. Sometimes you even knew their families. You'd meet husbands, wives. They came down to pick up their spouses from a day on the floor. You did have a sense of who they were. Again, I can't hardly ever remember walking away from a day in Topeka thinking, "The president of the Senate is clearly on the take." That stuff never even occurred to me.

But yet today, there's so much suspicion. I just think we need to move a little bit away from that and have healthier conversations that don't devolve that quickly.

JM: The politics of the day fuels that suspicion.

SK: It fuels that suspicion. Sure it does. Today, it does. But I think again, we're speaking in the wake of a killing yesterday of conservative, Charlie Kirk, it's just a really sad day. This is out of control. This is not where we need to be as a country.

JM: And both sides are trying to use that tragedy. Immediately, conservatives are blaming the left for his assassination. The records show that there have been a number of shootings—the legislator in Minnesota. Clearly, we are devolving politically. I think we both recognize that.

SK: Yes.

JM: In a way that we don't recognize.

SK: We worry about it. At the end of the day, if you have a bias, you do want to see your state, your community, you hope for good things to happen. We don't hope for bad things because we have hard questions. You hope all of this makes for a better state, a better community, a better country.

JM: Even as a reporter, you want government to work.

SK: Absolutely.

JM: That's why you're there.

SK: That's what you're aiming for here.

JM: Right. Just taking it down a notch, I mean, my memories of the Statehouse, when people would ask me about it, I'd say, "It's just like its own small town."

SK: Absolutely.

JM: It's like your own village. You had everybody there. You had the intellectual, the this, the that, the same kind of people you might find on the streets of Mayberry in a sitcom.

SK: Right.

JM: You had the whole population there.

SK: Yes.

JM: And it felt like that when you were there. It was a community of sorts.

SK: I used to say to John Petterson sometimes, "Well, that lawmaker is not real bright." He would say, "Well, a legislature is supposed to be sort of like the state it comes from. There are smart ones and ones not so smart, and there's fat ones and skinny ones, and you have the whole ball of wax here. That's sort of what it's supposed to be."

JM: I think it was the US senator from Lincoln, Nebraska, was it J. J. Exon who talked about "Mediocrity has its place. It's representative of the people."

SK: It's representative of the people.

JM: That was my recollection of the Statehouse, too, in those days. It was actually a very fun place. I looked forward to going to work.

SK: I loved going to work over there. And you're right. It was a small town. And once you're there for a year or two and you begin to see how the parts work together, it's a fascinating thing to watch come together, how bills become law. Someone's idea, a governor signing that bill one day down the road. I found the whole thing, it was my favorite place to work in all the years that I've been in this business because particularly in Topeka, people did get along really well. There was an *esprit de corps* in the press corps. We'd go to lunch together sometimes. It was just the most fun place to work.

JM: I would second that. I think that was my favorite time, too.

SK: It was terrific.

JM: Well, Steve, I really enjoyed talking to you, and I really appreciate your time.

SK: What a pleasure.

JM: I know you have to go teach a class.

SK: I'm going to go teach a class.

JM: I want you to go do a good job there. To the extent that any of them do want to go into journalism and be daily reporters, we need them.

SK: We do need them. There's no question about that. Yes. Thanks for having me, Jim.

JM: Thanks, Steve. I appreciate it.

SK: You bet.

[End of File]