Jim McLean: Good morning, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project Board and a former reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is August 4, 2025, and we're here at Red Rocks, William Allen White's historic home in Emporia to interview Tim Carpenter, an award-winning Statehouse reporter who now works for the *Kansas Reflector*.

White, of course, was a Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the *Emporia Gazette*. Called "the spokesman for middle America," White gained national fame for his editorials against the Populists of the late nineteenth century and those in support of the Progressive policies championed by President Teddy Roosevelt.

Tim Carpenter is well known in his own right to Kansans who follow politics. He started covering the Kansas Statehouse in the mid-1980s as a reporter for the Topeka bureau of the United Press International. In 1988, he went to work for the *Lawrence Journal-World*, and then in 2004, he moved to *The Topeka Capital-Journal* where he anchored its Statehouse reporting team until 2020 when he joined the staff of the fledgling [*Kansas*] *Reflector*.

The *Reflector* is a nonprofit digital news organization which in my opinion currently provides the most comprehensive coverage of Kansas politics and state government. Newspapers across the state rely on its coverage. Our volunteer videographer is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann. It was Dave's idea to do these interviews here at Red Rocks.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others who inform the public about state and local policy making during the late 20th century and early 21st century. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations of generous individuals and occasional grants.

Welcome, Tim. Thanks a lot for doing this.

Tim Carpenter: It's great to be here, and it's great to be in William Allen White's home.
JM: It's a perfect setting for a conversation about journalism, isn't it?

TC: Yes, I'd say so. I feel a little bit out of place, like I shouldn't be here.

JM: I just walked around the place briefly, and I mean, you go into the dining room, and there are pictures of the three presidents who had dinner with William Allen White here in this house.

TC: We know what a giant he was in journalism. His little typewriter's upstairs. It's pretty incredible. It's a different era. It does show you that journalism does change always.

JM: Absolutely. You know, he literally gained a spot on the national stage as an editor of the *Emporia Gazette*. He wrote that "What's the Matter with Kansas?" that famous editorial where he was taking Populists to task. He got to know presidents. He was very influential in Progressive Republican politics for decades.

TC: He took on the [Ku Klux] Klan, which in some circles would have been a really unpopular thing to do in rural America.

JM: Absolutely, yes. He had the courage of his convictions for sure. So, we're here, and we're going to talk about your career in journalism. Now, you're not a native of Kansas. You grew up in Missouri on a farm, right? Just somewhere south of Kansas City?

TC: That's right. Southeast of Kansas City. It was a dairy farm until I was a teenager, Holstein Dairy. Then we had beef cattle. And my parents have since passed away, but my brother and I are trying to save the family farm over there.

JM: So, in addition to your journalistic gig, you're still farming?

TC: We have cattle and hay fields and just trying to put it all back together, rebuilding fences. It's all fundamental stuff.

JM: Is that how you spend your weekends?

TC: That's where I was yesterday, all day.

JM: Really?

TC: Yes.

JM: Building fences on the farm.

TC: I was actually trying to figure out how to make a hay mower work.

JM: All right. So, how does a farm kid from Missouri end up as really one of the more noteworthy Kansas journalists of the last, I'd say, 20 years covering Kansas politics? Talk us through how that happened.

TC: So, when I grew up in Greenwood, Missouri, we subscribed to *The Kansas City Star* and *Time*s, the morning and afternoon paper of Kansas City.

JM: Both the morning and afternoon.

TC: Yes, we got both papers, two papers a day. On Sundays, my siblings and my parents we each had a section of the paper, and maybe pass it around to each other, sitting there on Sunday afternoon, reading the paper. We always read the news and was aware of things. And I went to Kansas State University [K-State] to study agriculture, and it was kind of agribusiness, and I got to the point where I was in an Agricultural Market Structures, a high-level econ course. It had a calculus problem—this was how long ago it was—across two chalkboards, and I just threw up my hands and said, "I'm not very good at math. I'm going to need to find something else to do."
JM: A common refrain from journalists, by the way.

TC: It is indeed. For one year, I only took what I considered interesting classes at K-State, and one of them was an Intro to Journalism course, and the professor was Rob Daly, and he told me what journalism was all about.

JM: What did he say?

TC: He said that "You go interview people. You take some notes. You come back, and you write your first paragraph. That's called the lede. Then you write some quotes and some background, and it's time to head to the local tavern." I thought, "Those first parts sound tricky. I'm incredibly shy. I don't know if I can actually do interviews, but if I can learn some of that stuff, I'll have a job after I get out of college."

So, I took all the journalism courses necessary, ran the Kansas State paper. The student paper was a five-day-a-week paper at the time.

JM: The [*Kansas State*] *Collegian*.

TC: The *Collegian*. A very good paper, great people. I went on to—my first job out of school was at United Press International [UPI] in Topeka.

JM: You got your first taste of covering state government when you were at the *Collegian*. You came to Topeka to cover what? John Carlin's State of the State address?

TC: Yes. As a student, I don't know why I had this idea that it was important for a college student to go to the State of the State address by a governor, but I did. John Carlin gave it. I think it was probably '84, '85.

JM: About halfway through his—yes.

TC: I wrote a story about his State of the State address, and I've done it dozens of times since then, but it was the first taste of, and I thought it was interesting. You've got to remember, you go to the Statehouse. You cover things. It's sort of like continuing education for the mind because the subject matter is so diverse. Every day can be different. And being a reporter, you can just sit around asking people nosy questions, and that seemed—to question authority seemed like a good idea.

JM: I'd like to have this discussion with everybody that comes through here because my first year at the Statehouse was 1981, five, six years before you got there. But John Carlin was governor at the time when I arrived. But I loved the place. It just seemed to me like it was its own small village. It had everything that a small town has, the diversity of population, the diversity of views. It was kind of a self-contained place, and people, generally speaking, had political differences, but it was a collegial place in those days. Is that your memory?

TC: I think there's definitely been a trend away from that collegiality.

JM: Absolutely.

TC: You could see that in Washington, DC. Bob Dole used to talk about having great debates on the floor of the United States Senate and then going out to dinner with a Democrat that he just went toe to toe with. And I think that's good for government. That was good for Kansas government, too. There was an era in which that was certainly done, and I think now people are so combative that they don't even want to listen to other people's ideas, and that's to the detriment of all Kansans.

JM: Many times, there aren't real conversations going on there. People are on the floor essentially spouting their talking points and then not listening. It's not really a conversation to the degree that it was at least in my memory. You've been there through that transition.

TC: We have fewer, robust, honest debates about legislation on the floor. A lot of people are just coerced to voting a certain way. Others are told to stay in your seat and don't debate this issue, just keep quiet. The leadership has it all figured out.

I think there's another element, too, here. Since 2020, all legislative House and Senate proceedings and all House and Senate committees have been livestreamed and archived in video form. I think actually it's good for Kansans to see how politicians are really working and what they're doing.

JM: It changes how they behave.

TC: I think their behavior did change, and I think they say less controversial stuff, also to the detriment of us.

JM: So, you graduate from K-State, and your first job out of college was with United Press International?

TC: Yes. UPI. In Topeka, they had a tiny, little office near the Capitol [Statehouse] where I was.

JM: In the Jayhawk Hotel.

TC: That's right. Then they had a bureau in the Statehouse with the Associated Press [AP] and all the other media. My job, I just sat down at a desk, and my beat was the state of Kansas in its entirety. I thought, "How in the world am I going to do this?" But I had good teachers. Lori Linenberger was the editor, John Braden was in the Capitol with UPI. He was a good reporter. They were good teachers.

I used to go over to the Capitol before work every day and read the UPI wire. You might think that's today flipping through my phone or looking online. Every UPI story printed out on a roll of paper—

JM: It would spool on the floor.

TC: It would run down to the floor. I'd just spool it back and read all the UPI wire copy from all over the country, all over the world, out of Washington because I was desperate to learn how to be a real journalist. I thought if I just kept reading, some of it would rub off.

JM: The clattering of those wire service—

TC: It was a typewriter—[makes typing sounds].

JM: That was one of my earliest memories when I got my first job at the radio station in Parsons is that sound.

TC: Sure, yes.

JM: It was pretty loud, too.

TC: Yes. I think it was a great thing. UPI also had this—we send texts to each other now, but they also had a method of sending text directly to a bureau or to all the bureaus across the country, and that was also another piece of paper that printed out every little message on your desk right next to you, and that rolled out on to the floor, too.

JM: You used to have a spike on your desk with all that copy.

TC: Yes, you had a way of talking to people. Say there's a big story, and three states are working on it. You could communicate with all of those at the same time. And they also had shorthand. I think it comes from the telegraph era where people had shorthand for writing some words like "and" was "et."

JM: That's Latin.

TC: A UPI person would write "Cheers and regards, Tim," [spelling out] "C-h-r-s e-t r-g-d-s," and I do that today on emails.

JM: Do you really?

TC: Yes. Unless I'm pissed off, and then I might not do that. This is my calm, principled closure to a text or an email.

JM: So, you worked for UPI for a couple of years. UPI barely exists today, certainly not—it doesn't exist in the way that it did then.

TC: My hiring had to be approved by the president of United Press International personally. That's how money strapped they were. They hung on for a couple of years, and then the wheels really started falling off. I got laid off with a couple hundred other UPI reporters around the world. They stayed for a bit longer, and I went to work for the *Lawrence Journal-World*.

JM: Right. You stayed there for quite a while.

TC: I did. I stayed at the *Lawrence Journal-World* for about sixteen years.

JM: And you weren't their primary Statehouse reporter. That was Dave Toplikar.

TC: Right. At the *Journal-World*, what I did was I would parachute into the Capitol and write about higher education or K-12 schools or this issue or that. I was not there every day. I did have a bit of office space that I shared with public radio.

JM: That was me.

TC: I had a place to sit down and throw my stuff while I ran around and tried to cover stories. I was a really kind of a part-time presence there.

JM: Do you remember how tiny that office was? It was KANU, which is now Kansas Public Radio [KPR]. It was Channel 27 from Topeka, and there was the *Journal-World*. All three of those desks, we were sitting about as close to one other then as we are now.

TC: Yes, you want to be friendly with people around you.

JM: Dave Toplikar was the primary Statehouse reporter, right?

TC: I think for a time he was, yes. For us at the *Journal-World*, this is really not our—this is not our wheelhouse.

JM: Higher education, certainly.

TC: Yes. I tried to write about that because the University of Kansas was there, but other properties like the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, the *Kansas City Star*, *Wichita Eagle,* they would have more of an everyday presence year-round at the Statehouse.

JM: That changed later when Mike Shields was the city editor, and they really emphasized Statehouse coverage for a while.

TC: Yes.

JM: So, you worked for the *Journal*[-*World*] for 16 years.

TC: Sixteen years. Then I got a call from the *Capital-Journal*, asking if I would come over there and be an enterprise reporter.

JM: They didn't hire you necessarily as a Statehouse person?

TC: No, it took a year when they lost a Statehouse reporter. I saw the writing on the wall and volunteered to go over there during the legislative session. So, I went over to the *Capital-Journal* in 2004, and 2005, I started covering every session.

JM: Do you know who they lost in 2005, don't you?

TC: You?

JM: I left, and Chris Grenz left.

TC: Grenz was there. Right, I remember that. And I worked with Chris Moon.

JM: Sure.

TC: Who was quite a conservative person. You know, everybody thinks that journalists are a bunch of liberals, but he was extremely conservative, quite religious. I believe he's a minister now. We would stand there, and these politicians would abuse us as a bunch of crazy liberals, and I just felt for him because I knew in his heart that wasn't him, and they just didn't know what they were doing. They were just casting arrows at people without thinking about it.

JM: Right.

TC: And the reality is that reporters are liberal, conservative, and then there's this swath in the middle. They're very much like the general population.

JM: I agree with that. Most reporters do have an idealistic bent. I mean, they're in it many times for a reason that they really believe in brokering information to the public in an honest way.

TC: So, it's to say you believe in the First Amendment? Yes. That's pretty radical.

JM: They're mission oriented, I think, for the most part.

TC: I see. Yes, some come with a real purpose. My purpose is to tell people, to write stories about events that are going on so they don't have to take time out of their busy lives to go listen to a boring meeting that does have real news value in it. So, that's part of what I do. I kind of roll with the ideological shifts and keep my politics to myself the best I can.

JM: That's been my observation. You're very good about that. It's funny. When you first broke into covering the Statehouse, those were the days when literally the wire services and newspapers in particular found news value in just about anything that happened there. A committee meeting could generate an entire story in those days. A lot has changed since then. But you covered the minutiae of state government then.

TC: Yes. So, imagine dozens of committee hearings a day. You might go to a committee hearing, and there would be testimony in that committee, and the bill not even get passed out by the

committee, and you would write an item about it. It's more of the minutiae, the blow by blow, the day to day, that has really—as the numbers of reporters in the Statehouse declined, has really been diminished. There's some people that, they're going to wait until the House passes the bill and the Senate passes the bill and maybe until the governor signs it to write their first story about it. That's just the squeeze that is on people and their time at the Statehouse. But there was an era before that where the Associated Press [AP], UPI, and whatever newspapers would write more of the blow by blow.

JM: They were process oriented.

TC: There was that, but it also told the reading public, "This issue is going on. Here's what's happening. This is in"—

JM: It's in the pipeline.

TC: Yes, at the Capitol, and you might want to pay attention to it or not instead of waiting until it's all over, said and done.

JM: Also, it educated people a little bit about the process, I think.

TC: Yes.

JM: People had a general understanding of how laws got made.

TC: Yes, they all had civics in school, but it is a bit of a mysterious process. They have some ridiculous rules that they still have today. It is a process you've kind of got to learn and learn the language of.

JM: Again, as I noted earlier, you've been there a long enough period of time. You've seen that change pretty dramatically. When you first broke into the press corps, it was a pretty robust operation, more than a dozen, fourteen, fifteen reporters?

TC: I tried to think about what it was like then. So, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* had two people. We shared an office with Harris News Service, which represented a group of western Kansas papers. They had two people as well. I think the *Topeka Capital-Journal* has tried to maintain a two-person bureau even today. Harris News Service is gone. In an office next door was the Associated Press.

JM: Three reporters and four during the session.

TC: Yes, exactly, three full-time reporters year-round. They're down to one, and that one single AP reporter spends half the time collaborating with AP reporters in other states on major stories. So, the AP component of it has been really diminished. Those reporters were always good, excellent reporters there. It's just the reality of the Associated Press, as people have dropped AP.

And it's happened at newspapers. Look at the *Kansas City Star* and the *Wichita Eagle*. They had separate news staffs then. Maybe during the session, the combined *Wichita Eagle* and the *Kansas City Star* now owned by McClatchy, they could send five reporters into the mix. In the past few years, McClatchy *Eagle* and *Star* have shared one reporter. So, that is the diminishment of the Statehouse press corps that has had all kinds of ramifications.

JM: Well, one of the ramification, as we just talked about, is you cover things more generally just because you can't do otherwise because you don't have the manpower.

TC: You try to do the best you can that day. I think it's had two consequences. There's less blow-by-blow coverage, which can be useful, and it also builds a level of knowledge among the reporter on the issue.

JM: And it builds a record, too.

TC: Yes, it does. The second thing I think it's done, the diminishment of people, is that there's less investigative journalism by those reporters in the Statehouse because they just absolutely do not have the time to do it. You draw a line under that and say, "What are the consequences of that?" and I say, "Politicians are getting away with more mischief than they used to."

JM: Yes, I think that's absolutely true.

TC: It's just going to happen.

JM: Yes. The exception to that, we talked about your time at the *Capital-Journal*, and you worked there for what? Fifteen, sixteen years?

TC: Yes, so about 15 or 16—we can do the math. So, about the same—

JM: And you worked with a lot of people. Chris Moon, you mentioned.

TC: Yes.

JM: Andy Marso was a great reporter who you worked with. Jonathan Shorman.

TC: Jonathan Shorman, Celia Llopis-Jepsen who's at the public radio.

JM: Right.

TC: I worked with Sherman Smith who's at the *Reflector* with me now. Some very talented reporters rolled through there. Then also just the people that I could observe working at the *Star* and the *Eagle* that had a lot of experience and were really skilled, too. So, I've always tried to read the content of other reporters there because I want to know what they know, but also there's ideas about how you cover stories and how you might approach something.

JM: You did your share of investigative work when you were at the *Capital-Journal*. You won several awards.

TC: Yes.

JM: The Burton [W.] Marvin award, most people probably don't understand, don't know anything about it at all, but it's the award given annually by the William Allen White School of Journalism at KU, and it's quite prestigious among journalists.

TC: Yes.

JM: And you've won that several times.

TC: A handful of times, yes. It's an investigative, enterprise reporting award for really reporting that goes above and beyond. It's the kind of story that might qualify for that is I wrote a story about the attorney general at the time, Paul Morrison who had an extramarital affair. It involved improper conduct in a public building at the courthouse in Johnson County. He was subsequently elected attorney general, and basically, he resigned after the story came out.

JM: That information wasn't available at the time of the election. It came after.

TC: Yes, indeed. He had been attorney general, and I think he served basically a year as attorney general. You know, I drew the line at what you're doing on the public's time in a public building should be shared with the public.

JM: Right.

TC: One of my friends asked me—I'd interviewed Paul Morrison. I'd been to his house. I wrote a profile about him before he was elected. I just thought he was a quality attorney and somebody you might consider voting for. You've kind of got to set those personal things aside when you work on these stories. It was a pretty big blow to Democrats, too, because Paul Morrison had been a Republican, recruited by Governor Sebelius to run as attorney general, and I think in the future, he could have certainly run for governor himself. It really took him out of action. And the Democrats in Kansas have always kind of had a short bench.

JM: Absolutely. I can't remember—he broke the mold in terms of winning the AG's office. I can't remember another Democrat who served in that position in my time.

TC: Yes. So, another story that might be an example, I wrote a story about Governor Brownback's brother who basically was a menace back home in Parker, Kansas.

JM: I remember that story.

TC: I was all over southeast Kansas for seven months in courthouses, looking up his information about what he had done. He would drive his farm truck into a ditch, and the sheriff would show

up and basically would say, “I’ll call my brother. You can take me into custody if you want. Go right ahead.”

I just think there are certain things about that—and it was a complete, comprehensive story about his conduct, and how that touched the hand of the governor.

JM: What made it a news story was the fact that he would use his brother’s influence.

TC: That’s correct.

JM: By the way, for people who are watching this interview, we’re at Red Rocks, William Allen White’s home, and there’s renovation work being done here. So, you might occasionally hear bumps and thumps and that kind of thing. It’s just because there’s construction work going on.

TC: For a second there, I thought it was the ghost of William Allen White, but apparently, it’s not. I’m relieved.

JM: They’re fixing the place up. But I wanted to talk to you about that. As crucial, when you talked about Paul Morrison and the fact that he had some admirable qualities, a good public servant. As a reporter, how do you feel when you know that you’re writing something that could end his political career? You don’t have any personal animus, but you feel dutybound to report it, let the chips fall where they may. How difficult is that?

TC: So, I don’t take it lightly. These are people’s lives we’re talking about here. I don’t take it lightly. You just keep working until you know with absolute certainty what you’re writing.

JM: That you’ve got the facts pinned down.

TC: That’s right. For the Brownback story, I left tons of material on the cutting room floor because I wasn’t going to write anything about the governor’s brother that wasn’t told to me by somebody who was there firsthand. I listened to a lot of secondhand stories, but I didn’t include any of those in the story.

JM: How many of those people that you talked to were willing to be quoted by name?

TC: A number of them were.

JM: Because that’s important, too.

TC: Yes. And I used only name sourcing. I didn’t use unattributed information. I interviewed people that their names never appeared—nothing was attributed to an unnamed person.

JM: So, you could understand the context.

TC: Yes, it just broadens your horizons and your understanding of the issues at play.

JM: So that you know that what you're reporting wasn't a one-off thing, that there was a pattern here.

TC: Yes. One of the tests you can give yourself is, if you keep interviewing people about a subject and three times now somebody has told you, very knowledgeable about this personally, and they told you the same thing for the third time, you can kind of accept it as like, "Yes, I think I understand this point here."

JM: Right.

TC: I don't take it lightly. I tell people when I do interviews that I can be friendly but I can't be your friend, and I can't be the friend of people in politics *per se*. I don't put signs in my yard. I don't put bumper stickers on the car. I vote, and my vote's my personal choice.

JM: You don't make campaign contributions.

TC: No, of course not. I think you kind of keep it at arm's length. The other thing is, I think I've learned over the years to not take a lot of this personally. I have my own ideas about what good government is. I have my ideas about what ag policy should be, water policy, and the like. But you kind of set that aside and write about what people are saying.

It's impossible to not have some subjective element come into your reporting because you are a product of your experiences. I grew up on a farm. I know what that's like. I know what it's like to have the farm shut down due to economics. We sold the dairy herd, and that was over, something my grandfather created. That's hard, but it's a good lesson to have. You understand Kansas agriculture a little bit better from that experience.

JM: You're getting into some of the nuance that I think is really important to understand. Let's just talk a little bit about the difference between objectivity—people say reporters are "objective." Well, I think we both would say that that isn't necessarily the case. Objectivity is a pretty high bar. But what we're striving for is balance in a story.

TC: Yes.

JM: And understanding the content and not putting things that are out of context and really reporting accurately and then having the editors who oversee your work question you about "Do you have the facts down?"

TC: Sure.

JM: That kind of thing.

TC: Yes. I think you want to have an array of voices in your stories that sort of like cover the landscape. That's what your goal is.

JM: Right.

TC: There's sometimes where some slice of that pie doesn't want to talk to you. You just have to say that out loud in your story that, yes, the Senate president who a bunch of people are complaining about wouldn't talk about the subject matter for this story.

JM: Right.

TC: And there's really nothing you can do. I don't have the power to arm twist people into sitting down and talking to me. So, you just need to say that out loud. And I think everybody may be—it's an objective/subjective thing, and people are going to be subjective about what they think the truth is and what the truth isn't.

I think there was a time when I started in journalism where people were much more apt to read a story and accept this piece, that voice, this idea, this proposal as just what was in the landscape of the subject. And now today, we've evolved into something that's quite different. People want echo chambers. If people are patting the reader on the back and saying—if the writer is just saying exactly what Jim McLean wants to hear, then they view that as truth, and it's become a distortion. It's very problematic. It's fractured the ability to reporters to present things because it's so easy now for a politician to say, "That's just not true. That's a bunch of baloney."

JM: Fake news.

TC: Yes. Governor Brownback, I remember telling me at a news conference, I asked him about something, and he said, "Oh, Tim, that's more fake news." So, all politicians at all levels have adopted this strategy to demonize reporters when people are writing uncomfortable things.

JM: Let me ask you about that. I remember when Jeff Colyer ascended to the governor's office when Governor Brownback went to serve in the first Trump administration.

TC: Yes.

JM: I remember Medicaid expansion was a big story then as it is today, but that was several years ago. But I remember asking Governor Colyer about it several times about Medicaid expansion, and his response would always be, "Kansans don't support it." Then I would say, "Well, actually all the polling suggests they do by 60, 70 percent," and he would just look at me and repeat the fact.

TC: Blankly?

JM: No, he'd just look at me and say, "Kansans don't support it," in the face. So, here's my question to you as a reporter. How do you communicate to the reader that the response you've gotten from the governor of Kansas is on its face inaccurate?

TC: Well, you just say, "Governor Colyer insists that in his view Kansans don't support Medicaid expansion."

JM: Even though—

TC: And then you can have a quote from him, get him on the record. Here's a quote, "Medicaid expansion is unpopular, period." Then you can go to the Fort Hays State University study that has relentlessly year to year documented how Kansans broadly support Medicaid expansion. And you would just put that in there, put the numbers in there, talk to one of the pollsters if you want to and put their comment in there about what their interpretation of those numbers are.
I can remember the first time that politicians started flat out calling other politicians liars. It was a word that I just resisted and would try very hard not to put in a story because lying means you know the truth, and you're saying something different on purpose. Having a different opinion and a different view doesn't make you a liar. So, we've cast about with this lying word, trust, and truth, and it's become mangled so badly that I think readers need—readers need to read more broadly. I think that's a problem. You think that a journalist is not telling you the truth, but really, they're just reciting what people are saying. It may not be what you want the only story theme to be, but there's a lot of truth in what's being written and said.

JM: That's true certainly for the publication you work for, even though some people believe the *Reflector* is a liberal mouthpiece. Do you come up against that much?

TC: Yes. Let me just say this. I worked at the *Lawrence Journal-World* in a pretty moderate community with a very conservative publisher. The *Topeka Capital-Journal*, kind of more of a Republican town with a shifting centrist to Republican editorial policy.

JM: But a fairly conservative paper. Dolph Simons at the *Journal-World*.

TC: Extremely conservative. All things that begin with a big R are good, Republican. So, what I'm saying is, I've dealt with being a reporter, going out in the community and have people enraged about an editorial that was written, and I get to answer the questions about it. I've worked in places where they've had conservative editorials and less conservative editorials, and then at the *Kansas Reflector*, we have four reporters and one opinion writer, and I would say that opinion writer is left of center.

JM: Absolutely. I would agree.

TC: So, unfortunately, people don't make the proper [distinction] between things that say "opinion" and "news."

JM: They never have. The *Wall Street Journal* is a good example of that, too. Its editorial page is what it is, but the news reporting doesn't have the same conservative business-oriented slant necessarily as the editorial page.

TC: Until you work in a newsroom and see the intense firewall that existed between the newsroom and the publisher's office—

JM: And the advertising department.

TC: Right. I don't answer to advertising. The owners own the paper. I understand they will get the final say, but I'm going to work straight ahead and do the news stories as straight as I can until I'm told not to. And 99.999 percent of the time, I got no static about what I was writing. You see what I mean?

JM: I know exactly what you mean.

TC: I write what I think is appropriate, and if somebody at this level up here says I can't, then I understand that. They own the property. I also get to decide whether I continue working there or not.

JM: Exactly. I remember, I only had that kind of pressure applied to me a few times in my career, and one of them when I was reporting on Westar at the time, and David Wittig who was the CEO at the time, the coverage—David Wittig perceived the coverage as critical, but again it was just reporting what was happening in terms of Wall Street and everything else.
I got a call from the publisher who said they had invited Mr. Wittig over to an editorial board meeting. They had reserved the last fifteen minutes of the meeting so he could express his grievances about me, and I needed to attend the meeting and listen and respond. It turns out ironically that he complained about something, some reporting on his golden parachute should he decide to leave the company. The story he was complaining about was actually a *Lawrence Journal-World* story, not my story.

TC: Excellent, way to go, *LJW*.

JM: I dodged that bullet. But you're right.

TC: This is another example of how you have to be thick-skinned. As a reporter, you're going to get praised, and you're going to get criticized. There's going to be people that act stupid and crazy. I was at a Republican National Convention in Minnesota, and a delegate kicked my laptop at a Bob Dole event, where Danforth and others were there to praise Bob Dole. I leaned my laptop against the wall while I took notes, and he realized I was a reporter and kicked my laptop. I needed that worse than I needed water to drink that day.

JM: Right.

TC: But there's another example. I wrote a story about Congressman Jim Ryun living in Washington. He bought a house in DC—we're talking about million-dollar properties here, for a below-market rate. It was really about how this was kind of an insider deal with political undertones about how he got a below-market house in DC. So, I just wrote this very expansive story about it.

Two months later, I'm sitting in the newsroom, and somebody says, "Hey, they want you in the conference room." So, I walk in there. Congressman Ryun and a couple of his staff, the whole editorial board of the *Topeka Capital-Journal* are sitting there, and he has come. He has an audience to complain about this story. I hadn't read it in two months.

So, he starts criticizing the story. You could wilt under that environment, I guess, but I finally decided—"Does somebody have a copy of the paper? I just need to refresh my memory." This was a story that was 3,000 words. It was a massive story.

JM: As many of yours are.

TC: In the end, nothing was wrong with that story, nothing. He didn't like the tone.

JM: Boy, I've heard that a million times.

TC: Tone. Word choice. It would have been great if you hadn't written this story at all, you know? But he just wanted to come, go right over my top—Congressman Ryun didn't give me a buzz. I've published my cellphone number in the newspaper and online for 20 years. It's easy to pick up the phone and tell me. And I've made many mistakes as a journalist. People call me and tell me, and I appreciate that.

JM: You have to own up to them.

TC: The sooner the better.

JM: Absolutely.

TC: I want to fix what's wrong. And there's a lot of people that have jobs and go have a lousy day at work. They're a house painter, and, oops, it's the wrong color. You just come back the next day and fix it. Well, in journalism, you make a mistake in the newspaper, people let you hear about it, and tomorrow, they run a correction. "Tim had a terrible day at work yesterday, and here's what happened."

JM: Not quite that explicit, but yes.

TC: I know, but that's the idea. The world knows, and it's in the permanent record of when I screwed up.

JM: You made a mistake. I remember one time running a column about Governor Brownback, when he was running for the Senate against Jill Docking, and there were allegations that he—I think it was an ad he produced was anti-Semitic because Jill Sadowsky Docking is Jewish.

TC: Correct, yes. I remember that.

JM: So, I wrote this column. To his credit, he called me directly and said, "What you wrote here is inaccurate." So, I ran a correction the next day. That's just what you have to do. Again, it was a column, not a news story.

TC: Yes.

JM: In any event, I want to take you back a little bit. When you talked about—I want to go back to the Medicaid expansion example, and you talked about using the Fort Hays State *Kansas Speaks* poll. I don't want to get too much into the weeds here, but that's very interesting because the organizations that support Medicaid expansion have also done numerous polls, right? But you chose the one done by a public entity and not the ones done by the people who are advocating for the change because why?

TC: Well, polls can be distorted by the way you ask the question, by the way you collate the answers. So, you have to have a certain level of skepticism about polling in general.

JM: Particularly if it's released by the organization that's pushing for the policy change.

TC: They're called push polls, and they ask questions in a way to elicit a certain answer.

JM: They can.

TC: Yes. And I think to a degree, I'm not a huge fan of polling these days because I think some of the polling quality has declined.

JM: It's gotten very much harder to do.

TC: In part because it used to be everybody had a landline phone. You would just call those and people would pick up. They would get surveyed over the phone. But now everybody has cellphones. I think they've tried to compensate for that. It's really hard to get that real cross-section of society. I think that's problematic. I think these days when pollsters interview people, I'm not sure people are quite honest. They might say, "Yes, I'm not voting for Trump" or "I am voting for Trump" or "I'm going to vote for Governor Kelly" or "I'm going to vote for Kris Kobach or Derek Schmidt." I just don't think they're as honest as they once were.

JM: They're willfully gaming the polls.

TC: Maybe they're jaded or something. I don't know. I'm very cautious of polling, particularly when you want to talk about one or two percentage points. I don't think they have any idea what—

JM: I would agree with that. When you have a poll that says 70 percent of people support something, it's generally speaking—

TC: Then you can confidently say a majority of Kansans support X.

JM: Correct.

TC: And the poll is there. Medicaid expansion to more lower-income people. Kansans support it. Kansans want not medicinal marijuana; the majority want recreational marijuana.

JM: Let me ask you this then. You bring up another interesting point as a reporter that you have to grapple with. How do you explain to people who will ask you, Medicaid expansion, 70 percent support; recreational marijuana, similar support. How can something have that broad support and get nowhere in the Statehouse? How does that happen?

TC: So, the leadership of the House and Senate says "no," and they will block bills from coming out of committee or getting heard on the House or Senate floor—

JM: But if that many Kansans support it, why don't they suffer a consequence from that?

TC: Because—well, they perhaps should. But not enough people read about this. Not enough people make the connection that Medicaid expansion was blocked by House Speaker Dan Hawkins, or medicinal marijuana was blocked by Senate President Ty Masterson. They just don't make those connections, perhaps. And the world keeps revolving, whether or not we have those things or not. Yes, popular, but the world doesn't come to a crashing close if those things, those reforms don't occur.

JM: The way a political scientist would explain that is that, yes, people support those issues, but they're not the issues that they primarily go to vote on. There are other issues that they care a lot more about.

TC: Good schools. They want the local hospital. They want law enforcement to come when they call 911. They want safe highways to drive on. These are the things that elections are won and lost on.

JM: Let's talk a little about the *Kansas Reflector*. That's where you work now.

TC: Yes.

JM: And you've been there for how many years now?

TC: Five years. We just had our five-year anniversary.

JM: You were one of the initial hires, weren't you, when they staffed up?

TC: Yes, they hired Sherman Smith to be the editor. There's thirty-nine of these Statehouse bureaus across the country. We're one of thirty-nine. There's a parent nonprofit in North Carolina called *States Newsroom*. They aggregate all this statewide copy, put it on a website. They have a handful of Washington, DC reporters that cover the White House. They have editors

on both coasts. Everybody's wondering when they're going to open the Hawaii bureau because applications for that will be off the charts.

But they're in thirty-nine states because they're not in states that have very robust state independent news coverage—Texas, California, and the like. These thirty-nine bureaus operate independently, cover the Statehouse politics and public policy with not a whole heck of a lot of intervention from the bureau, the office in North Carolina because you can imagine, they just have a small enough staff. They can't micromanage much of anything.

So, we're a pretty independent operation here in Kansas and write the stories that we think are important. Some are teeth rattling and get a lot of attention, and some of the things we think are important are less so, but we get to decide what we think is important news.

JM: Again, I think that the *Reflector* does a fantastic job, particularly in the absence of the press corps as it used to exist with so much competition and so forth. You really are now—you have probably the biggest bureau at the Statehouse of any publication.

TC: That's true.

JM: Now, the wire services, as you mentioned, UPI is essentially gone.

TC: Yes.

JM: Fewer and fewer papers depend on the AP because they can't afford it.

TC: Yes.

JM: With smaller circulations and everything else. So, the *Reflector* and the Kansas News Service, a lot of the copy that's generated by both, ends up in papers across the state.

TC: Yes, because—

JM: You're our quasi-wire service.

TC: Across the spectrum of the *States Newsroom* and all of the Statehouse bureaus, an underlying benefit to the public is that all content is free. So, you can go to the *Kansas Reflector* website today. There's no paywall. There's no ads. You can go, and any journalistic entity can republish our copy for free, and you can see twenty-five to thirty Kansas newspapers choose what stories they want to publish and they print them in their papers. Our copy goes into the Midwest, and it's on a national website. If you write a pretty decent story, it's going to go on a national website. So, there's a national readership.

JM: Just like a wire service.

TC: That's right. But when you can bring together these kinds of reporting resources, you can make a big dent in Statehouse reporting.

JM: You mentioned earlier, the *Reflector* has a reputation for being a little left of center primarily I think because of Clay Wirestone, your editorial writer. He's a great editorial writer, and I think he really makes powerful points, but how do you respond to the notion that—in today's politics, you're just mainstream liberal media.

TC: Well, I would try to explain the difference between a news story and an opinion editorial. There's a lot of guest columns on there, too, that Clay doesn't write. We have voices from all over Kansas, and some of those are probably in a broader range of the political spectrum.

JM: I would agree.

TC: I can't defend the opinion stuff. I don't.

JM: What about *States News*[*room*] generally and where the money comes from? Is there any kind of ideological bent to that?

TC: I have no contact with fundraising at all. The *Kansas Reflector* people do go out in communities. We've probably done twenty-five or thirty—you could call them "town halls," but basically show up and talk about—people ask us a bunch of political questions. We've been in Emporia. We've been all over the state. Basically, we talk about politics. People ask us a bunch of questions. We have a coffee or a beer sometimes, and we talk about the things that people are interested in. Sometimes twenty people come; sometimes a hundred people come. We try to share that way.

And that is in part—there's a fundraising element to that. I'm sure people who come to that are more generous with their money. So, there is fundraising that occurs in Kansas, but *States Newsroom*, the parent nonprofit, really takes the thrust of fundraising away from us. If you're a substantive donor, I think the metric is $1,000, they'll publish your name online. There's a list.

JM: So, people can review that list.

TC: You can go see, there's organizations. I think there's foundations and there's trusts and there's people and some are wealthy, some are not. I think one of the donors is a labor union, for example. So, there's all kinds of donors. It's just a mish-mash of people. Some of them maybe have a certain political bent, but others just understand the absolute value of having reporters looking over the shoulders of politicians in the Capitol.

JM: Do you feel in today's environment when you go into the Capitol, I mean, I know the *Reflector* has had its differences with some of the legislative leadership. Do you feel like they give you an honest shake? Or do you feel like they have an opinion about—

TC: Well, they definitely have an opinion about what they think I am.

JM: The publication generally.

TC: Yes. They'll apply that to me and snarky remarks, whatever, but I can just blow that stuff off.

JM: Bob Dole used to call the *Hutch*[*inson*] *News*, The Pravda of the Plains.

TC: There's people who refer to Lawrence as The Socialist Republic of Lawrence.

JM: That's right.

TC: And I came from Lawrence. I'm in the Capitol from Lawrence, and there's people that don't know much about Lawrence, which in reality is more conservative than what people give it credit for.

JM: And it's in the First Congressional District now.

TC: It is now. I feel I have so much in common with the people of Dodge City, Kansas because the first district arcs around and grabs my house in Lawrence and then goes away. That was just all gerrymandering a bunch of stuff. I'm pretty sure I can bring a steer from the Missouri farm and plunk it down in my backyard, and I will feel one with the feed lots of western Kansas.

JM: Let me ask you this. I remember a time when I was starting up the KHI News Service at the Kansas Health Institute. You came to me. You were pretty skeptical about whether that was a legitimate news operation or whether there was an ideological bent because again, we were nonprofit, and most of the funding came from the Kansas Health Foundation. I think that was appropriate at the time. I welcomed those questions just like you welcomed—what I said then is what I think you're saying now. The work just has to stand on its own.

TC: It's healthy skepticism to wonder about—

JM: Absolutely.

TC: Are you a puppet being pulled in a different direction? But the work should speak for itself.

JM: Exactly.

TC: Unfortunately, a lot of politicians don't spend their free time reading all of our stories. They just believe what they want to believe without looking at the facts. People read headlines. You and I read headlines sometimes, and people read a headline and they don't even read the content and draw a conclusion from it. That's an occupational hazard.

JM: That's an age-old story, too.

TC: I've had to defend my work in front of all kinds of political, right and left, people.

JM: But the bottom line is you feel no pressure from the funding entity on a daily basis in terms of what you cover, what you don't cover, how you cover it.

TC: I have had in five years maybe two—let's just say fewer than ten conversations with an editor at the parent nonprofit in five years. That was just editing major stories to try to make them better. I've met the leadership of the entity. They stopped by our office in Topeka shortly after we started. I met them, shook their hand, sat down in a chair and had a chat. As far as having somebody with a microscope on the *Kansas Reflector* every day, that's not happening.

JM: How big is your audience? Do you have any idea? Newspapers, you talk about their circulation. Do you have a sense?

TC: I'm not very good at some of these numbers. The readership has increased substantially every year, substantially.

JM: So, tens of thousands of people read it?

TC: I'm thinking that in February of 2025, there was more than a million readers of the *Kansas Reflector.*

JM: That's a substantial audience in a state the size of Kansas, for sure.

TC: Yes. But it's out on social media. One of the things that's changed about journalism in my time is that social media is a much bigger presence. People can get access to our copy through TikTok and X and Facebook and all that.

JM: As we've discussed, you have straight news coverage. You have editorial, and you also have a podcast.

TC: Yes, we have a podcast. It's sort of like—I sit down with political and policy people, and we kind of have a conversation about an issue. One of the advantages of it is it helps to build relationships with politicians. A thing that I think is very important for a reporter and has been minimized as politicians try to be standoffish, they don't want to engage in interviews like they used to. Why answer difficult questions of a reporter when I can just send a statement to them and not get into it?

JM: Into the email box of people who you know already support you.

TC: So, if I can sit down with a politician, I think I can show them in my questioning and in my sensitivity to issues that I can be a reporter they can trust. So, I like the podcast interviews for that reason. It builds relationships. You can't be part of a massive organization like the state of Kansas and not have things go wrong. Things go wrong terribly. I mean, to a certain degree, foster care lives are at stake. So, when those inevitable things happen, it would be good if I'm the

Senate president to have a relationship with a reporter and maybe pick up the phone and have a conversation about this. “I think you need to know X. I think you need to know Y as you go about reporting this story.”

So, relationships matter, and the other thing about it is I can sit down and I’ll write a story about a podcast interview that’s about this long. I can only put so much in. But in a twenty-five minute conversation, you can say so much more, and it’s unedited by us. We’re not cutting it up and doing a bunch of fancy editing and saying, “Gotcha there.” It’s just the conversation.

If I had a sneezing fit or something in the interview, we’d cut that out. I think Jeff Colyer was doing one when he was governor. He went on a serious coughing jag. The guy who painted the mural of Brown v. Board in the Capitol, I was sitting there with a woman who went to school back in that era and the artist, and basically the artist got elements of his own mural backwards. It’s in the Capitol. He got corrected. We said, “Okay, let’s just stop for a second. I’m going to ask that question again.”

JM: Sure.

TC: It’s just kind of like we’re not here to embarrass an artist about a painting he made.

JM: You want the right information to get out to the public.

TC: Yes. It’s not like I’m sanitizing anything. If I was doing an interview with the governor, that’s probably something I might not do, but I want to be polite.

JM: Speaking of relationships, kind of to close this down, looking back over your long career, you and John Hanna of the AP have probably been there the longest of the current crop of reporters.

TC: We started at about the same time, I think, as reporters.

JM: As you look back, speaking of relationships, is there anyone who stands out in your memory, not necessarily in relationship to you, but someone who stands out as somebody who you thought a lot of in terms of their ability to navigate the policy process, their leadership abilities, their veracity, their honesty, their relationship with the media? Anybody who stands out in your time at the Statehouse?

TC: So, Governor Colyer was governor for basically a year, but Mark Parkinson replaced Kathleen Sebelius when she went to work in the Obama administration.

JM: Mark Parkinson who had been the chair of the State Republican Party.

TC: That’s right.

JM: He became a Democrat to run as Sebelius’s—

TC: He either figured out which was the right party to get into or he's a turncoat. I don't really know.

JM: Right. So, Kathleen went to Washington.

TC: Mark Parkinson was lieutenant governor and became governor. He was exceptional. As far as I know, he's the only person who's given a State of the State address with no notes.
I was asked to come into a House Democratic Caucus meeting one time, and they said, "The governor's coming." So, I sat down in the back to see what he had to say. One of the things he did was he pointed at me and said, "I want all of you to know this. You should all be using your campaign money to subscribe to as many newspapers as you can because we need them. We need them badly." I liked that. But I liked his professionalism, his thought process, and so I was very impressed by that.

There's a Republican, Steve Morris, who was Senate president. It was a different time. It was less combative. He might have been considered a moderate Republican, but every Friday, you could just go down to his office and ask him anything. And that doesn't happen now. You're closed off. Every Friday, you could go down there and ask about what's happening next week or what happened yesterday, and you could have a conversation about it.

I think that kind of openness and that leadership style, I think it's good for Kansans because you could clarify the statement that was made. You could ask that follow-up question. And when you close yourself off as a politician, you really shouldn't complain about the coverage, if you're not going to participate in the coverage.

JM: Steve Morris from Hugoton who was the Senate president and one of six, I think, maybe more moderate Republicans who were taken out—

TC: Right. In the 2012 era, Governor Brownback decided the Senate wasn't conservative enough, and he recruited and funded and messaged some House members, and they succeeded in taking out a bunch of so-called moderate Republicans.

JM: If I can be permitted to say this, my wife, Deb Miller, who was secretary of Transportation for several years.

TC: Yes.

JM: I think she shares your opinion of Mark Parkinson. She really thought he did a magnificent job leading the state during his time.

TC: Yes. I think he was exceptional. There's other good governors, and I've often thought that the job of governor is incredibly difficult, incredibly hard. To be a United States Senator, a US House member, you can go to DC, and nobody knows what you're doing. You could go to your committee meetings or not. But the governor is on at all times.

When Governor Brownback became—he was a US Senator. He became governor. It's a tradition. Statehouse reporters can go interview the incoming governor in December before they take office. I mentioned to him, "Governor Elect, you're going to be surprised at the scrutiny you're under." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Governor, you could go out on the lawn of the US Capitol and plant forty trees, and nobody is going to come over and say, 'Congressman, you're planting trees. Where are the TV cameras? We should do interviews.' But as governor, you could go wander around the Capitol with a coffee cup in your hand"—

JM: Which he did. A teacup. It was a teacup.

TC: He did. "You might end up with a TV camera in your face. If you went out and sat on a park bench outside, people would come and interview you." It's just a totally different thing. You're on. There's a lot of decisions you have to make. It's a very tricky job. It always makes me wonder when people sign up to run for governor. My first question is "Have you lost your mind?"

JM: "Why do you think you want to do this?"

TC: "Are you sure?"

JM: My mind goes back to Bill Graves. Just a quick story here. I worked for a time for Congressman Slattery. He ran for governor against Bill Graves, and Bill Graves won handily. I was part of the Slattery campaign. I get a job for a business publication, and I get subsumed into the *Topeka Capital-Journal*. At one point, they want to send me back to the Capitol to be a reporter. I said, "Okay, I'd love to do that. But there might be a small problem here. I need to go talk to the governor to see if he's okay with it." I literally participated in the campaign against him.

He couldn't have been nicer because I'd covered him for years before when he was secretary of state. He was great about it.

TC: It speaks well of Bill Graves.

JM: It speaks very well of Bill Graves. He wasn't threatened by it.

TC: That he wouldn't have that animus. Me, personally, I know exactly what you're talking about because if I did public relations and then thought about going back into news, I may never do PR, and I never have.

JM: I know.

TC: Because I would be anxious about that, crossing that street, that line back and forth. I am a dinosaur. I've been a news reporter professionally for thirty-nine years.

JM: I'm the exception, and it probably shouldn't have happened.

TC: Many of my peers over the years have gone on to other and better things in public relations.

JM: But I saw the light. I wanted to go back. I saw the power of journalism. I thought the power was on the other side. It isn't, at least it wasn't. It may be now. I wanted to say that in the context of people who I look on, saying he knew who he was. He was comfortable in his own skin. He was a nice person, and I think that—I just remember him, being amazed that he could be that sanguine about it, but he was.

TC: We all know that power corrupts. Some people get in leadership, even in the legislature, and they use that title to settle old scores. It's dangerous. It's bad public policy. It's a gigantic waste of time, and it's not what you're elected to do.

JM: Tim, this has been a lot of fun. It's great talking to you. You've been a good, solid reporter for a long period of time. I hope you continue for several more years at the *Kansas Reflector* because the state needs it now more than ever.

TC: It's my pleasure. I wouldn't miss an opportunity to sit down and talk about journalism and wave my arms around a little bit and get excited.

JM: Thanks again.

TC: Sure.

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