THE NIEMAN FELLOWSHIPS:
Reflections from the First Two Women

By 1979 — thirty-four years after women were first allowed to participate in the Nieman program — a total of thirty-four women (thirty-one Americans; three from abroad) had been appointed Nieman Fellows. We asked the first two women Fellows, Mary Ellen Leary and Charlotte Fitz-Henry, to give us remembrances of their year at Harvard. Their perspective, especially valuable to those women who became Fellows after 1946, illuminates better than any statistics the process of change within society and the Nieman program.

MARY ELLEN LEARY

One would like to report that the experience of being one of the first women Nieman Fellows at Harvard back in 1945-46 was a kind of Valkyrie role, feminism triumphant, male student body and faculty alike moved to astonishment, President James Conant in awe that history was being made as two females were actually classified students of Harvard College. “The first,” they told us solemnly. Clash of cymbals, beat of drums!

But what comes back to me most is how painfully shy, scared and diffident I felt. It was only eight years since I had left graduate school at Stanford, but I had become committed since to the tumult and troubles of big-city life, big-state politics and city room pressures. That step I’d made. Could I cross now to so lofty an academic world as Harvard?

The characteristic that most stirs my respect for young women in professional careers today — and most distinguishes their era from mine — is their confidence. They move rightfully. They exhibit a comfortable assurance in their talent and their opportunity. The world and the time are ripe for the plucking: they need only to reach out.

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In retrospect I recognize that the uncertainty I suffered a generation ago was the pain of passage from one distinct epoch in history to another, from post World War I to post World War II. One factor in this trauma was the searing experience of the Depression. The comfortable middle-class world was wrenched apart. Millions of seasoned adults were abruptly thrown out of work; every young person lived with anxiety over joblessness. I never ceased to marvel that I could go to work mornings, and to work that I chose.

But another source of uncertainty was the cultural rarity of a woman purposefully pursuing a career. This was not a common pattern, yet never did I consider news reporting just a comfortable span between adolescence and marriage, just a way to make money. For that, in my youth, women became teachers. But to step from a sheltered home life and private schools to elect a professional career was still rare enough to startle one’s elders. It wasn’t, I was often chided, “done.” It wasn’t “ladylike.” In Omaha, Nebraska, Victorianism thrived even forty years after the good Queen died. The lifted eyebrows didn’t deter me but they drove my confidence into the closet.

The third, and perhaps most diminishing, pressure was journalism’s attitude towards women. We had “token” status. Although I was told that the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in that period “had never allowed a woman to step inside the city room,” most newspapers had finally admitted one woman to the city-side staff. She was usually locked into the woman’s angle on breaking news. Unfortunately, the paper on which I found an opening, Scripps-Howard’s San Francisco News, had two. It was borne in on me through
three long years while I toiled as "secretary to the city editor" that I had to wait my turn behind both until death, marriage, or some other kind circumstance gave me an opening. No metropolitan daily would presume to maintain a pattern of two women on its city-side staff. When the break finally came — society reporting spurned in the meanwhile — assignments for a long time were slanted scoly to feminine aspects: interview the widow, pose as a woman on welfare, write up the opening of school, New Year's first baby, June's first bride. But I will credit my colleagues and those capable women before me: eventually the "tokenism" gave way, and women reported on fires, welfare exposés, the advent of public housing, the impact of "war agencies" massed at San Francisco, and the Japanese in War Relocation Centers. Finally World War II forced the press to open the position of political reporter.

A colleague at the San Francisco News, Bob Elliott, was a Nieman Fellow and he prodded Louis Lyons and others at Harvard to take a risk and admit women. Then he came home to egg me on to apply. At Scripps-Howard headquarters in New York the senior editors grimly advised me, at a stopover en route to Harvard: "This year will ruin you as a reporter." Except for that put-down every man I worked with gave me encouragement, along with hell for unclear leads.

There was certainly no "women's movement" in those days, no consciousness-raising about feminism. The goal was to submerge feminism by proving oneself competently competitive with men.

What eased the uncertainties my first day at Harvard was the warm and gentle welcome extended by Professor Arthur Schlesinger, God bless him; he took me to lunch at the Faculty Club. I treasure the memory of that initial introduction, his thoughtfulness and courtesy, the special interest he showed all Nieman Fellows but especially to us, the first women.

The topping on his cordiality was the meal. He introduced me to the Faculty Club's wartime boast which still survived: horsemeat steak. Robust but good. As I recall those meat-rationed days, a full dinner — soup, a good-sized slab of medium-rare steak, mashed potatoes, salad, dessert and coffee — cost only ninety cents. I lived on it.

In fact my recollection of that whole year is largely fashioned around gastronomical delights, especially the cocktail openers and famous dinners when major journalists bantered their way through Nieman challenges. The one deviation from customary Nieman repasts occurred at the afternoon seminars. I didn't like beer. I drank tea instead. I couldn't detect that it made any difference to anyone.

Both Charlotte FitzHenry and I had elbowed our way out of "tokenism" by the time we got to Harvard. Charlotte had acquired solid experience with the Associated Press, had moved from Bloomington, Indiana to the Chicago AP bureau and had recently been covering business news and the Stock Exchange, where her presence on the floor constituted another "first" in breaking the sex barrier. Out in California, I had been the first woman to cover California's State Legislature — topped by being the first woman allowed on San Quentin's Death Row. After only one year of experience at the legislature, I came to Harvard still absorbed in mastering the process so that I could comprehend the power moves within it. This interest led me, while a Nieman Fellow, to visit several neighboring legislatures. I went often to the State House in Boston; I took a campaign jaunt with Curley; I journeyed to legislatures in New York, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. I was dumbfounded in Providence to see reporters tediously card-indexing all the bills. Then I learned that the state didn't bother to print them until they were enacted into law. In other legislatures I found the press banned from floor contact with legislators because of past press corruption; and in some, committee hearings were secret, and reporters were forced to loiter outside the doors to pick up crumbs of news. Learning in the Nieman environment was wider than the campus limits.

But the exhilaration of classes exceeded all expectations. The courses were marvelous — especially the theory of government that lay behind what I had experienced in political reporting. I ate it up. It was the last teaching year there for Professor Macllwaine; his lectures on political theory were a great experience. He would arrive in class with a precocious pyramid of books from which he read appropriate passages, thus illustrating the value of going directly to original sources by reading in English out of Greek and Latin texts. I took a fine course on constitutional law, Professor Fainsod's course on the Soviet revolution, a study of European democracies, and Roscoe Pound's course "Introduction to the Elements of Common Law." This I found so exciting I persuaded some of the other Fellows to sample it one day, and they said it was the dullest stuff they ever heard. They didn't have a law professor for a father — but there were enough courses for all tastes.

The atom bomb was the unsettling big news of those years. I have always been grateful to Louis Lyons that as Niemans we had a front row view of future space explorations. We heard a number of great nuclear scientists who previewed for us the coming space age, including the possibilities for peacetime use of the atom. They gave us a first chapter of what would become debates over the dangers of unleashing the atom. All this rich experience I recalled recently as I was writing about the Venus probe and nuclear protests.

The Oscar Handlin lectures about the impact of
successive immigrant waves on American cities were particularly fascinating to me, and remain relevant background as I write today about Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal. But the focus he took on Boston's conflicts became extremely vivid in a personal way. I found relatives in the area whom I'd never seen before, and ran smack into the hostile Irish Catholic suspicion: "What are you doing hobnobbing around with those uppity Harvard people? They aren't your kind." Coming from a melting-pot city, San Francisco, I was appalled at the divisiveness: it was my introduction to ethnic conflict.

Charlotte, meanwhile, was taking courses in city planning and urban problems, a background she used after her marriage to John Robling and her move to Connecticut.

Were we conspicuous amidst the male population, much of it still in uniform and just easing back to civilian life? Not really, because Harvard had recently opened its doors to Radcliffe students.

The only sex-related rebuff I experienced occurred when I tried to enter the Harvard Law School, just to sample one class. Professor Thomas Reed Powell was famous for a certain flamboyance in the classroom. I had met him. He often came to Nieman functions and was a personable, provocative figure. So I said I planned to show up one day at his class. "You may not," he said firmly. "No woman comes to class at the Harvard Law School."

"For heavens' sake, why not?" I asked. He weighed his reply. "Well, we don't have the proper toilet facilities in the building," he said finally. "How long is your lecture?" I inquired, and guessed that I could forego a ladies' room for a couple of hours. "That's nonsense. I should like to attend." He was adamant. So was I. One bitter cold morning I set out for an 8 a.m. lecture, booted and bundled against the weather, my head swathed in a wool scarf, mittened hands clutching my green bag. As I plodded through library stacks in the all-male throng en route to the appointed classroom, a door flung open, blocking the narrow passageway — a door labeled on the side thrust towards me, "Men." The emerging figure was Professor Powell and he spotted me. Holding the door open as barricade, he planted himself in my path: "Where do you think you are going?" I didn't have the phrase "male chauvinist" on my tongue in those days, but I was so exasperated by the quaint effort to stem the tide that it made me laugh. I turned on my heel and left. I knew the barriers were falling. Within two years, as I understand it, women students were enrolling at Harvard Law School.

When preparing to read at Widener library it was unsettling to be admonished, "Radcliffe students sit in there!", and directed to a decently segregated alcove where it was thought appropriate to shunt women out of harm's way. "I'm not a Radcliffe student," I had to explain ceaselessly. "I'm a Harvard student." At the librarian's desk long whispered conferences followed my statement. I learned to carry my identification everywhere.

We were all caught up, those days, in tumultuous discussion about how to make the press better: more independent of advertisers and business managers, more free of corporate conservatism. Recent publication of the newspaper PM held bright hope for changing journalistic patterns. I think we augured the underground press in some of those sessions. My colleagues, brilliant science writer Leon Svirsky, combative labor specialist Arthur Hepner, sensible, down-to-earth Frank Kelly, the persistently questioning Bob Manning, all wanted to evolve a model for the Utopian newspaper. We spent hours outlining what it ought to be and ultimately produced a book. Today it is interesting to observe that the complaints we raised then about the press are reiterated in complaints now about television news. We deplored superficiality, the urge to entertain, soft news and sensationalism rather than hard news; the failure of reporters to investigate, to learn background material and to interpret issues.

One touching experience that year seemed to be an important link in the story of women's advancement. Mrs. Schlesinger invited me to address the League of Women Voters. (Her special sensitivity to women breaking free from the cocoon of centuries is most marked by the library established in 1965 in the Schlesinger name at Radcliffe. I am convinced that her interest, combined with that of her husband, also helped push Nieman doors open for women.) I didn't want that talk to dwell only on my own experience, so I sent out a questionnaire to approximately one hundred newspapers, selected for geographic range and size. I asked about women's acceptance on news staffs, how they performed, and how they compared to men. Replies were astounding. They were panegyrics. Editors fell all over themselves to tell their stories: Women were the most faithful on the staff, the hardest working, the sharpest

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probers, the most imaginative writers, the best and the brightest. What I sensed earlier had happened: the wartime years opened the gates. Women were moving into news­rooms in great numbers: they were accepted and appreciated — total change had come in less than five years. I have no idea why I didn’t have the sense to publish that information. But it cheered the League of Women Voters.

Yet the thing I remember with most excitement from that session is how many, among the grey-haired and plainly dressed, unobtrusive women in that hall, wore tiny gold lapel pins: miniature reproductions of a jail door.

These women had been imprisoned as suffragettes. That was the feminine “first” I encountered at Harvard that mattered the most.

CHARLOTTE FITZHENRY

In his last lecture before retirement, the late Ralph Barton Perry, a favorite of all Nieman Fellows, said he could explain William James’ philosophy in five minutes or five hours — depending on the time he had. I could write a book but I’ll try for a five-minute version of 1945-46, when females became Fellows.

Of course we were apprehensive. Thirty-four years later Mary Ellen Leary and I have confessed to each other that we were scared to death. But apprehension was allayed fast, especially by Louis Lyons and the late Arthur Schlesinger Sr., and by our male counterparts and their wives.

Our arrival had been too well-publicized — our pictures in Time, fan mail; we became uncomfortable interviewees, not interviewers. But once we were in Cambridge, everyone made an extra effort to settle us into the non-routine of the Nieman year as quickly and comfortably as possible.

Discrimination was minimal. Widener Library wanted to hide us with the Radcliffe women, but somehow, without a placard or a march, we soon were sitting in the main reading room with Harvard men. The press box at the football stadium was off-limits to women — I didn’t contest.

But as women, we had special chores, one being to address Mrs. Schlesinger’s club at the Athenaeum, where she introduced us by saying, “Girls, here are our feminists!”

Those women really were feminists, some distinguished in battles won for us before we were born. I’m not sure either of us qualified. It’s true that we had broken several patches of new ground before we came to Harvard. Mary Ellen was the first woman political editor of the San Francisco News. The Daily Pantagraph hadn’t previously employed a woman police reporter or assistant city editor, nor had the Associated Press in Chicago previously put a woman editor on the state or trunk wires.

There were no female quotas then, and even though the war opened many jobs to women there still were men in our offices who could have filled the posts we were given. The assignments came because we had worked hard for them. The work left little time to pursue women’s rights, which were not a high national priority at the time. We had started in this business when the eight-hour day was at the discussion stage and a five-day week (at the Pantagraph, anyway) was unheard of. My starting pay had been $14.10 a week and I was glad to get it.

Mary Ellen, however, has the feminist edge. A year before we were admitted as Niemans, she had written the Foundation asking to apply and was turned down. Obviously, she expedited the admission of women.

The real pioneer, however, was Harvard, willing to take a chance on us. The Nieman Foundation, endowed, after all, by a woman — Agnes Nieman — was less than ten years old when it opened its doors to us. The much older Rhodes Scholarships admitted women for the first time only two years ago — thirty-two years after we came to Harvard.

We came, like other Niemans to learn. My own study plan involved town and urban planning, and included two technical courses at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And like most other Fellows, I benefited from Schlesinger’s social history and Fred Merk’s history of the westward movement. Carleton Coon and Howard Mumford Jones took special pains with all of us. Alvin Harvey’s economics course left me going down for the third time in a sea of imponderables (until the day he told us to tear up our notes
CLAS S OF 1946

Front row: Ben Yablonky, Robert Manning, Mary Ellen Leary, Cary Robertson, James Batal, Louis Lyons (curator), Charlotte FitzHenry, Arthur Schlesinger
Back row: Arthur Hepner, Leon Svirsky, Richard Stockwell, Frank Hewlett

from the previous lecture because he'd explained a complex formula dead backwards — then I decided that if I drowned he'd probably go down with me). Yet Harvey was a frequent and favorite guest at our dinners and seminars.

That year we had a unique extra-curricular project — we wrote a book, Your Newspaper — Blueprint for a Better Press. The book dictated many of our dinner-speaker choices that year, and it also brought us together for meetings, endless meetings. Perhaps it was responsible for our unusual togetherness. Niemans, spouses and children, all of us, went off on excursions, saw plays, and heard concerts, together. We learned a lot from each other.

Much that we got from the year was prophetic. I can't read about Three Mile Island without an echo of Dr. Conant's atomic worries. A photo of the Boat People recalls Virginia Hewlett's rescue from a Japanese prison camp. The Israeli-Egyptian treaty requires special thanks to Jimmy Batal for introducing us to Arabs and the Balfour Declaration.

Planning studies and a fascination with local governments, well fortified by Schlesinger, ultimately led me into public relations for local and state governmental agencies, schools and non-profit institutions. I am so tremendously grateful to the Nieman Foundation for giving me the opportunity to gain depth, to open new horizons, and to learn to perceive good and bad, old and new, in the tide of ideas which rises around us.

Are women in journalism better off now than then? Of course. They are a thoughtful, well-trained, exciting group. Even so, there are still too few on editorial boards, writing science, politics or government. I think we've only got our toe in the door. But look to the future: If Chicago can elect a lady mayor (even if Illinois can't pass the ERA) anything can happen!

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