

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH NANCY MARCH

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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Nancy March Oral History Interview

Risley: Okay, it's September 24, 2020. We're here at Penn State and interviewing Nancy March for the Pennsylvania Newspaper Journalists Oral History Program. Thanks for doing this. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and about your family.

March: I was born in Berks County, Pennsylvania, in the Boyertown area. My family lived on land that was part of the farm that my father grew up on. My dad bought the land from his parents and built a house on five acres on a beautiful corner overlooking a creek. My parents were both poor growing up, and neither went past the eighth grade in education. My dad grew up as one of twelve children in a poor farming family, the Egolfs, and then worked for 40 years in a Pottstown factory, Doehler-Jarvis. My mom worked in the local elementary school cafeteria. Although my parents never had the opportunity for higher education, they insisted that my brothers and I have college educations. They worked very hard and instilled that in us.

My dad had an influence on my introduction to journalism at a young age, but not in the way you might think. He was the local school board president in our township, and there was a controversial decision involving his board that became the subject of an editorial crusade by the editor of the *Mercury*. The paper attacked Dad's decisions, which he believed were in good faith as a fiscal steward for the school district, and the situation created for him a lasting distrust and dislike of newspapers in general and the *Mercury* in particular. He often said that newspapers printed untruths and unfairly maligned individuals in public service. I grew up hearing about "fake news" long before it was a thing and, somehow, I became a journalist and started my career at the *Mercury*. It's not what my Dad would have chosen for me, but he was proud of me nonetheless.

Risley: Tell me how you got interested in journalism and where you went to school.

March: I was always a voracious reader -- always had a book in my hands -- and that led to a love of writing. I think it was in eighth grade that I decided I wanted to be a writer, and I never considered anything else.

My mom tried to steer me toward being an English teacher, but I wanted to be a writer, doing feature stories for magazines. I wrote poetry in high school (who doesn't?) and got a taste of what it was like to be published in the yearbook and school literary magazine. When I was applying for colleges, I only considered schools that had a journalism major because I thought I needed that to pursue my magazine dream. That brought me here to Penn State, where I majored in journalism and minored in English/writing option.

Risley: Did you work at newspapers when you were here?

March: I did not work for the *Collegian*. I decided that I wanted to enjoy college life as a student and would have the rest of my life to work in the profession. In my senior year, I had an internship with Montgomery Newspapers at *Today's Spirit*. That experience got me hooked on newspapers. I experienced the incredible variety of types of stories and people to be interviewed at a small paper like the *Spirit*, and I loved that. Also, it was the Watergate era and an inspiring time to be a journalism student. When I graduated, I was offered a job at the *Spirit*. But the *Mercury* was hiring and also offered me a job. The *Mercury* is a Newspaper Guild paper and paid well at that time, so I took the job there as an entry-level reporter. I didn't plan to stay in my hometown, but it was the best job offer coming out of Penn State, so that's what I did.

Risley: What was your first job at the *Mercury*?

March: I was a general assignment reporter, which means I did whatever the editors assigned to me. I graduated in November 1975, and that first holiday season, the editor had me pose as a Salvation Army bell ringer on High Street in Pottstown and write a first-person account of it. The *Mercury* had a reputation for doing that kind of story -- offbeat, getting on the other side of a story, inside it instead of just asking questions. The editor -- Bob Urban -- had me go back to Boyertown High School and spend a day in a student's life and then write about it. I didn't have a geographic or topic beat like many of the other reporters in the newsroom. I had feature assignments and daytime cops/breaking news.

The *Mercury* building was sold in 2019, and I had the opportunity to go through and grab some old clips. Seeing some of those 1970s stories in print was a stark reminder of how reporting and access to local

information has changed. I found a clip of a school bus accident I covered, and I had the name of every student, the extent of their injuries, and hospital comments about their condition. That would be unheard of today with HIPA rules and privacy of juveniles.

Risley: What did you like about working at the *Mercury*?

March: I liked the variety. I liked being a general assignment reporter, working on an interesting feature story one day and then a breaking news story the next day. And I was learning all the time -- how the court system worked, ins and outs of schools and education issues, meeting interesting people and hearing the highs and lows of their lives. And getting paid for it! Reporting never felt like work.

Then, my editor assigned me to cover Chester County courthouse. The *Mercury* sits on the edge of three counties, and Montgomery County is the county of most residents. We had a lot of readers in Chester County, so he decided to create a new beat and send me there one day a week to find stories in the courthouse and cover local trials. I loved that beat, and I tried to make the most of being there as a newcomer, seeking out stories -- looking for interesting people to profile, criminal trials that were coming up, political news in the county government.

In 1978, the Johnston brothers' murders became a big regional story. The Johnstons were ringleaders of a gang of thieves in southern Chester County, who stole tractors and fenced the tractors in the Pottstown area. It was an ideal criminal enterprise: You had one rural community with a lot of land and people who owned tractors, and then about 20 miles to the north, you had an area where people made good money working in factories and were building homes on big lots in the rural townships -- with lots of grass to mow and a need for a tractor. The Johnston fencing operation matched stolen tractors with willing buyers. It was a growing operation, and then the FBI started investigating. That's when things went haywire: the young members of the gang -- teenagers, really -- started cooperating with the FBI. The elder Johnstons murdered five of them in execution style killings to prevent their testimony.

Risley: Wow.

March: I covered the murder trials, which lasted six weeks and were held in Ebsenburg, Cambria County, in a change of venue. There have been

books written and a movie made about the case -- *At Close Range*, starring Christopher Walken and Sean Penn. It was a fascinating criminal case and a dream assignment for a young reporter, sharing courtroom space with veterans from *The Inquirer*, Philadelphia Bulletin and TV stations.

March: At the same time, I was doing a lot of education reporting in Pottstown schools, including a state Human Relations Commission order to intergrate the town's elementary schools with forced busing. This assignment probably had more lasting significance for me as a future editor than just about anything I wrote about. Covering public hearings about busing and the effects it was having on the town's culture and on families was poignant and important. Insights I gained writing those stories had a lasting effect on my eventual editorial leadership in Pottstown and education issues.

Risley: What was the *Mercury* like at that time?

March: It was an incredibly vibrant atmosphere and a place that everyone in the region knew, whether they loved the paper or hated it. The *Mercury* is a small newspaper, but it's always had a big influence. It has always gone above and beyond. It is the smallest newspaper to have two Pulitzers. It's always been a place where people are driven to journalistic excellence, no matter who was in charge.

Risley: Why do you think it was that way?

March: I think some of it is Pottstown. Pottstown is a gritty town -- a town with a lot of diversity and strong work ethic. It's always been a place of people pulling themselves up and pulling themselves together with their neighbors. The total *Mercury* coverage area is interesting for news because it's surrounded by a lot of rural area where there are -- like the Johnstons -- unusual crimes. And, then it also has, the sophistication coming in from the other side of Montgomery County. The mix creates an interesting dynamic, I think.

Risley: What other positions did you hold with the newspaper before you became the editor?

March: I went from reporter to copy editor. I was wire editor for about a year. And then we went through a change of regime. A new publisher, Sandy Schwartz, was brought in, and he fired the editor and others in

the newsroom. It was a chaotic and difficult time, and I watched good friends lose their jobs for no reason other than a housecleaning. Sandy, however, saw something in me and became the strongest mentor in my career. He was a bit of an ominous presence and could be tough to work for. I was assigned the job of stringer coordinator, charged with building a corps of stringers to cover news and features in addition to the staff writers. I hired them, I managed them, I edited their meeting stories when they phoned them in at 11 at night. That was my first management job.

Risley: What year was that?

March: Nineteen eighty-six or 87. From there, Sandy pushed me to be city editor and then managing editor. A couple times I turned him down because I was married to assistant city editor Bill March, and we had a young son. I didn't want to be in the hot seat. But I eventually accepted the city editor position, and then I became managing editor. And then the editor at that time, Terry Brennan, left and Sandy promoted me to editor.

Risley: And what year was that?

March: Nineteen eighty-nine. I was promoted to editor while I was on maternity leave with twins -- promoted by Sandy, [laughter] who had a reputation as the most chauvinistic, toughest guy that you'd ever want to meet.

Risley: What do you think he saw in you?

March: I don't know. I've been very blessed in my career that people have seen something in me that I didn't see in myself at the time, and they pushed me.

Risley: What were your responsibilities as editor?

March: Sandy wisely kept the separation of opinion and news. We didn't always have that at a small paper, but we did at that time. That's actually the era in which Tom Hylton won the Pulitzer for editorial writing under Sandy's leadership. I was in charge of news, and I was department head for the staff -- news, sports and photo. I was not as confident or secure at that time as I later became, but I had a great team around me. My husband Bill was managing editor. We had met in the

newsroom and we worked really well together. I would run the newsroom in the day. He would come in to work and bring our son Chris with him, because Chris was a kindergartener. We would have the page-one meeting and I would head home, with Chris, and Bill was in charge at night. Obviously, we never lacked for communication [laughter]. So it worked. It worked well. But then there was another change and the new publisher was not going to deal with that arrangement. So, he fired me. I had been editor for two and a half years.

Risley: I want to come back to that. How big was the newsroom when you were the editor?

March: I think we had about thirty-five people.

Risley: Reporters? Photographers? Editors?

March: About twelve news reporters, three photographers, ten sports writers/editors and ten copy editors.

Risley: What did you like about the job?

March: I liked the ability to work with reporters on their stories and help them make their work better. And I liked the process of teamwork that created a newspaper every day. But it wasn't always easy. I was only 34 years old and I was female. And I had infant twins at home [laughter]. I liked the partnership that my husband and I had as the two top managers. We liked that teamwork and that creativity, you know, making and creating a paper together. We had a really good city editor and a really good news editor on slot and some outstanding reporters -- and we had a lot of fun in that newsroom.

Risley: So a new publisher came in and you lost your job. What happened?

March: I went to the *Daily Local News* in West Chester as features editor and then became managing editor. But I was considering other work options at the time. I was scared when I was fired because when I looked at my resume, there was only one thing there. And that scared me. I saw it as limiting opportunities for future jobs. And so I did some research and applied for jobs to see if there was anything else I could do as a writer but not in newspapers.

I had read an article about the business newsletter company, Progressive Business Publications, and I applied there and was hired as a newsletter writer and editor. While I was at the Daily Local, I was offered the job as editor at the Norristown paper, and I turned it down. I did not want to be an editor right away again. I wanted to understand things a little bit better. I wanted to grow. Progressive Business Publications was a good place to do that. Newsletter writing is different and in that company, the writers were challenged to understand the professions they were writing about and the readers who were buying the pubs. I gained skills in direct marketing and I gained a new appreciation for the business world. I also learned how to write tight and make every word count, a valuable skill for an editor. I learned how to listen to readers and not be the journalist who creates a publication that suits me, but instead understands how to converse with and hear what the audience wants.

Risley: Did your husband stay at the *Mercury*?

March: No, he was forced out six months after me. He wasn't fired but they made his life miserable. They finally offered him a package to leave, so he did. He went to the *Reading Eagle* as a copy editor and was there four years. And then he went to the *Daily Local*, which is where he worked the rest of his career as managing editor.

Risley: Tell me about coming back to the *Mercury*.

March: Word was out that Journal Register Company was buying Goodson Newspapers, and I wrote to Bob Jelenic, then CEO of JRC, and pitched a return to the *Mercury*. He gave me that opportunity, and I took it. I had been gone seven years.

Risley: Had the newspaper changed a lot in the time you were gone?

March: Different reporters, but the same type of reporters, the same drive. The newsroom had turned over with new hires in the years I was gone, and many of them were not very accepting of me as a boss. I had to prove myself, earn their respect and go through some turnover to get to a place where I had a team that I was comfortable with. And then I was editor from 1998 to 2016.

Risley: What do you look back on with pride about that time?

March: The reporters that I hired and mentored and pushed to do good work. And, the work was important, important to Pottstown and important to Pennsylvania. Do you remember the 2005 [state legislative] pay raise?

Risley: Yeah, talk about that.

March: That was our kind of story. We didn't cover state government, but that pay raise was an insult from legislators that resonated with every citizen in Pennsylvania, and so we played the wire coverage as if it was a local story. One day I got a call from a reader who said, "Why don't you put a little thing in the paper that we can cut out and send to Harrisburg and tell them what we think?" So we did.

I wrote a front-page editorial, and we designed a coupon to print with it. The headline was "Send a message to Harrisburg," and the coupon statement was that as citizens of Pennsylvania, we are outraged and demand legislators overturn the raise they gave themselves. It was reader engagement in the truest sense -- we invited and encouraged our readers to cut out this statement, put a stamp on it, mail it. Readers returned the statements to us by mail or in person, and we collected them and brought them to Harrisburg in bins. We had 10,000 letters. It may not have been what pushed them (legislators) to reverse the raise, but it was part of it.

The important thing -- and what we always tried so hard to do -- was that it gave our readers a voice. It gave them a seat at the table in reversing that decision. I was very proud of that kind of journalism. Another project was teen driving reform: We lobbied to change Pennsylvania laws to limit the number of teen passengers with a teen driver as a response to several fatalities in our area.

Risley: When you say lobbying, you mean on the editorial page?

March: Yes, on the editorial page. And a lot of news coverage on that topic. We also created a section of stories and distributed it in partnership with the Montgomery County district attorney's office for assemblies in high schools. Our reporting helped inform high school students about driving risks and the laws that pertained to them. We did an opioid abuse project earlier than most local news sites. That was a compelling body of work giving a voice to local families who had lost loved ones to addiction.

Besides the projects, we were also outstanding at breaking news. Our staff photographers were, in my opinion, among the best in the business and it drove a strong newsroom culture for outstanding coverage of breaking news.

Risley: So, the *Mercury* won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing. Talk about that.

March: Well, I'm fortunate enough to have worked at a paper that won two Pulitzer Prizes, as small as it was. I am unfortunate enough to have not been in the newsroom for either one [laughter]. Tom Kelly was a close friend and colleague when he won for photography. And I was in a Toyota dealership waiting for my car to be serviced. And the second one for editorial writing -- I was the editor at the time, but I had to take a week's vacation because the babysitter for my twins was taking a week's vacation. I was at home when that Pulitzer was announced.

Risley: So what did it mean to the newspaper?

March: It didn't change much. Of course we were proud, but that's the thing about the *Mercury* -- we believed in excellence every day, so when others recognized it, it wasn't considered a fluke. You know, 30,000-circulation newspapers don't enter the Pulitzer every year. We did. It's what we believed in. We believed that when the year starts, we're thinking about what we're going to do for a Pulitzer entry that year. And so it didn't change us. It was fun. We had great parties. We were very proud of it, and then it was time to get back to work.

Risley: So, what were you unable to do or regret during your time as editor?

March: When the resources started shrinking, then there were just so many stories we couldn't tell and so much reporting we couldn't do. That was hard. I wasn't just editor of the *Mercury* during those years. I was also regional editor for the Pennsylvania cluster of Digital First Media.

Risley: Talk about that job.

March: An incredible experience. It got me outside Pottstown and reinforced for me the pride in our staff and our work. When I went to national meetings of the regional editors group of DFM, I was the voice of small

papers, and I was always a little surprised at how much others wanted to hear that perspective. I came to see that we had more to offer -- and that we were doing better journalism -- than we sometimes realized.

Our staff was not afraid to try new things. We embraced digital change, and it was exciting not only to lead that effort but also to be in a room with editors at large national publications like the *Denver Post* and *San Jose Mercury News* and be listened to and taken seriously.

When John Paton became CEO of Digital First Media and distributed Flipcams to all reporters, our reporters jumped in and started shooting video as if they were digital veterans. Not everybody, even in our company, was embracing things as quickly as we were. That was a very heady time. I was traveling to meetings with nationally known journalists, discussing digital strategies for the company, and feeling like part of a much larger movement than in my little newsroom, which by that time was considerably smaller than the staff of 35 that was there when I became editor.

Risley: What were things like for women in the business, and how did it change over the course of your career?

March: My experience is not typical and looking back, I am very aware of that. I was really blessed. I was never denied a promotion or told I couldn't do something. At least not in the newsroom or on assignments. I encountered that skepticism in job interviews after I was fired and looking for a new job but never at the *Mercury*.

I was promoted to wire editor when I was eight months pregnant. I was promoted to editor when I was on maternity leave with twins. I never had any trouble as a reporter. I treated people as people, and everyone treated me as a person. I never got "the girl" treatment or if I did, I went right past it, so it didn't matter. I did have some issues as a female boss, especially one with young children, but that was not the same as being treated differently as a journalist.

Risley: What do you mean?

March: People like to resent the boss, especially a new boss, and being a woman with children gave those people a point to hang their resentments on.

Risley: How did you balance the job with having a family and children?

March: I don't remember [laughter]. Not much sleep and constantly juggling priorities. Knowing what you had to do when you had to do it. It was hard because my husband is in the same business. And so we had the same issues with long hours and unpredictable breaking news. Who knows when dinner gets on the table? My kids joke that they were always the last ones to be picked up from sports or play practices. Other parents thought Bill and I were divorced and shared custody of our kids, because one of us would drop them off at a Little League game and watch the first three innings, then go to work. And then the other one would leave work and come and watch the last four innings. That's what people saw. That's who we were. But we worked really hard to not deny our kids the opportunity to do whatever they wanted to do. We had a lot of help from grandparents and neighbors.

My youngest son said to me, not too long ago, that he could never settle career wise, because he grew up with us. He cannot imagine not loving what you do so much that you just never stop talking about it. All of our kids have followed their passions. One is a doctor, one is a digital journalist with Twitter, one became a college track coach and now manages a chain of sports stores.

Risley: That's great.

March: When I retired in 2016, my kids made a newspaper. When they were little, they made a newspaper called the *Sycamore Sun* because we live on Sycamore Road. And so they made a *Sycamore Sun* for me on the day I retired. They all wrote that they grew up with seeing our love of this work, and that it made a positive difference in their lives.

Risley: So you retired, but now you're working again. How did that happen?

March: When I left, I became the founding director of a nonprofit called Pottstown Works, which was a program to teach people how to get jobs and keep them. The poverty-to-work program was started at the *Mercury* in our community room by a group of women teaching people in the Salvation Army homeless shelter how to write resumes and conduct job searches online. These women got funding from the Salvation Army to expand the program at the same time I was leaving. They called me and asked me to join them. I became the founding director of Pottstown Works and I was also teaching developmental

writing at Reading Area Community College. The program had some impressive successes, seeing individuals go from poverty to jobs. After two years, the Salvation Army and I had a falling out. So, I was out of work when I got an opportunity to return to the company, now MediaNews Group.

Risley: What are you doing now?

March: I'm the content manager/editor of the *Lansdale Reporter* and a group of weeklies, Montgomery Newspapers, all of which are part of the Philly cluster of MediaNews Group which also includes the *Mercury*. I supervise a lot of coverage that overlaps with the *Mercury*, and I'm now backup editor when the current Mercury content manager is on vacation.

I have a different approach these days. I don't believe our small community newspapers are the place for breaking news or blockbuster stories -- we are the place to see what your school board is doing and what new business has opened and what good work a nonprofit down the street is doing.

It's a different dynamic than when I was editor of the *Mercury* with a full staff and running on breaking news, and you had to beat everybody, and you had to be the complete newspaper. This is very, very hyperlocal. I enjoy that.

I love everything about putting out a newspaper. I love writing a good headline. I love talking to somebody about a story idea. I love the wordsmithing and the line editing. And I get to do all of it.

Risley: What do you think was the *Mercury* role in the community when you were on the staff?

March: Watchdog and champion. Evan Brandt - the sole community reporter left in Pottstown -- is still a watchdog. He covers meetings, and he keeps an eye on every office holder, and people are not going to get away with anything. That's just so important. That has always been the role of the *Mercury*.

And also, it's a champion for the community. We started the Fourth of July celebration. We had a program that we started when I was editor the first time, and it still exists, called Operation Holiday, in which we

raise money at the holidays for gifts and food for kids in need. The difference between our program and most others, and the beauty of it still existing after all those years, is we pack the food ourselves. We invite people from the community to come to the firehouse where we set up, and we pack boxes of food. Sometimes it's our carriers, and sometimes it's our employees who drive around and deliver them to people.

We have always been "with" the community. We never behaved like we were the newspaper telling people what to do. Instead, our philosophy and our voice was, "Hey, you know, you need to do this a little better, because we need this to be better."

Pottstown schools are the poster child in Pennsylvania for inequitable school funding. I have written more editorials on that subject than I could care to count, paired with Evan's extensive reporting. And, it's still a problem, so we clearly haven't made enough difference in the halls of Harrisburg where we'd like to make that difference. But we made it in Pottstown. The people in Pottstown schools know that we care about the quality of education. And I think that's so important. That town knows that the *Mercury* believes in it and is there supporting it at all times.

Risley: You wrote editorials when you were the editor. Talk about how that worked.

March: The first time I was editor I didn't.

Risley: And then you came back you started writing editorials?

March: Yes. And that was something that I didn't necessarily aspire to, but I grew into it, and I have embraced it over the years.

Risley: And what did you like about it?

March: The ability to have a voice in writing about a wrong that needed to be righted, and also the cheerleading. I write a lot of cheerleading editorials.

Risley: Would you say you had a style or a voice as an editorial writer?

March: I'm encouraging, not confrontational. I never attack individuals. I attack things that people do. I never talk about the person. I talk about the action. I don't want to be a harsh voice. I want to be a reminding, encouraging voice. I write a lot of editorials with the theme, "Why can't we all just get along?" Call me wishful. And my big topic is school funding.

Risley: The number one topic?

March: Yes. At one time, we were in an editorial board meeting with (Governor) Tom Corbett. He was sitting next to me, and he was complaining that no one knew an aspect of school funding. I said, "Governor, we've written a bunch of editorials on that topic." And he said, "Nancy, nobody reads the editorials. And you know it." The governor said that to me! Can you believe it? [laughter]

Risley: Well, is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

March: Just how much I love newspapers. And how privileged I have been to work with so many wonderful people through the years. I feel so blessed that I was led to this career, and I feel so blessed to have worked with people who made the experience the joy that it has been. There is no better job and no better bunch of people than journalism and journalists. We never stop learning, we never stop laughing and we have the satisfaction at the end of the day of making a difference. That's why I'm still here.

Risley: Thanks so much.