

# **District Duo Party Dolls Set Precedence for Gender's Journalist Successors**

**by Jim Cox**

Nowhere within vintage radio's diverse ethereal environment is there to be found a male-oriented sector so conspicuously defined as that of broadcast journalism. Specifically it embraces a proliferating panorama of current events reporting by news readers, correspondents, commentators, analysts, opinion-givers and public affairs specialists. Collectively they delivered transitions and sometimes added editorial expressions about the local, regional, national and global events of history.

The plethora of newscasters—an umbrella application for that cadre of broadcast journalists—indisputably underscores that it was truly a man's world in the formative decades of the fledgling medium. The fact that baritones were preferable to sopranos in announcing items of major import hasn't been conclusively satisfied nor has it been disputed. There have been few hints to its root. It appears that, as a result of whatever rudimentary polling was collected in the early epoch, listeners overwhelmingly approved of male voices informing them about life's evolutions as opposed to distaff dispatchers. Somehow it seemed as if masculine delivery of these matters carried more authority and believability and that added weight among typical audiences.

And with only occasional exceptions, that's the way it existed throughout most of the golden age of network radiocasting, until that nearly impenetrable glass ceiling was shattered and more women were allowed in. Of a handful of exceptions that rose to positions of recognition within radio journalism, a couple of pioneers left permanent marks on their profession while active in it and on successors who built on their foundations. Their names are Mary Marvin Breckinridge and Nancy Dickerson. Aside from making an incredible impact upon early broadcast journalism, ironically both were ultimately elevated to Washington grand dames, active in similar, highly visible spheres of D. C. life. Their charmed existences, in addition to stunning professional accomplishments, should hold fascinating appeal to readers of *Radio Recall*. This article explores the parallels that characterize them.

Mary Marvin Breckinridge was born in New York City Oct. 2, 1905. She was destined to become the solo feminine member of the famed "Murrow Boys," a reportorial staff of 11 journalists secured by venerated CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow to assist with on-site European coverage during the war-ravaged era from the late 1930s to the mid 1940s.

At first glance Breckinridge appears an unlikely candidate for such an awesome responsibility. Born into affluence, a daughter of privilege, she met the British monarch while a debutante. Her great grandfather, U. S. Vice President John C. Breckinridge, was a Kentucky Democrat who failed in his bid for the presidency against Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Breckinridge's maternal grandfather was tire tycoon B. F. Goodrich of Ohio. Yet she turned out to be far more than a dimwitted social butterfly. A desire for adventure and travel,

instilled by her parents, led her to tour Europe three times before the outbreak of World War I, plus China and Japan after it ended.

She graduated from Vassar College in 1927 with a double-major in history and languages. There she fostered a collegiate alliance promoting peace, the National Student Federation, and was elected its first president. A couple of years hence Ed Murrow was elected the guild's leader, cementing an enduring friendship between them.

In 1928 she became an aviatrix, the first of her gender certified in Maine where her clan owned vacation digs. Her next hurdle involved becoming a horseback courier for the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS), the earliest society of U. S. nurse-midwives, inaugurated by her cousin also named Mary Marvin Breckinridge. At that juncture the Vassar grad, demonstrably unconventional, dubbed herself "Marvin" to distinguish between the duo. The appellation stuck and some addressed her by it for the rest of her life. Breckinridge labored for the FNS in isolated stretches of the Appalachian Mountains along Kentucky's eastern ridges. The FNS helped lower the maternal death rate in that territory by about 70 percent.

Requested in 1930 by her cousin to return to New York to learn cinematography so a FNS fundraising flick could be produced, Marvin was tutored by a motion picture photographer. Then she put on a one-woman show by writing a script, giving directions for operating hand-cranked cameras, specifying lighting details and riding 600 miles on horseback to shoot her epic saga. *The Forgotten Frontier* was a film about the nurses and gratified mountaineers they assisted.

Next, Breckinridge was introduced to domestic politics as an intern in the Washington congressional office of Arizona Democrat Isabella Selmes Greenway, her cousin and godmother. While a secretarial assistant to Jouette Shouse, chair of the executive committee of the Democratic National Committee, Breckinridge met a foreign-service officer from Dayton, Ohio, Jefferson Patterson, a bachelor 15 years her senior. Patterson, heir to the National Cash Register fortune, was even more affluent than she. In time he was to become her life's mate.

The next goal she set for herself was learning still photography through a year-long course at a sophisticated New York institute. The encounter refocused her life into photojournalism. She did well, soon selling text and accompanying illustrations to *Life*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Junior League*, *Town & Country*, *Vogue* and similar periodicals, including some metropolitan dailies. With multiple assignments in hand, she sailed for Europe in July 1939, intending to be away for six weeks. While working in Lucerne, Switzerland, news arrived that Hitler's troops had crossed the border into Poland. The Lucerne Music Festival she had planned to cover for *Town & Country* was suspended and all the other events she had commitments for were cancelled. Her trip's purpose instantly evaporated.

Breckinridge went to London, anticipating sailing from Europe as quickly as possible. But she had second thoughts. "It now seems foolish to run away from the most interesting thing that I could be doing on earth right now," she wrote her mom who, in America, was anxiously awaiting word. Considering what was happening around her, it was relatively easy to line up replacement magazine work for she was right then in the global hot spot. Having earlier met Ed Murrow through the National Student Association, she looked him and his wife Janet up

in London. Murrow was so intrigued with the magazine assignments she acquired that he asked her to appear on CBS and share some of her experiences with the home audience. She did three times.

“Murrow didn’t touch her script,” noted Murrow Boys biographers Stanley Cloud and Lynne Olson. Unknown to Breckinridge, Murrow had asked the CBS brass in New York to listen. She displayed “a natural radio voice—strong, clear, and confident, with an upper-class American accent ... cool and self-possessed.... Unlike her male counterparts, Breckinridge never showed any nervousness about broadcasting,” the authors affirmed.

Murrow liked her third performance so much that he proffered a job as a CBS correspondent in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Breckinridge accepted. As a matron of high society, her appointment seemed out of character to some, including CBS news chief Ed Klauber, Murrow’s boss, who along with owner-chairman William S. Paley even employed male secretaries. Klauber thought some of Murrow’s hires were eccentric yet he didn’t veto them. “Give the human side of the war, be honest, be neutral and talk like yourself,” Murrow instructed as Breckinridge departed for Amsterdam.

Said Cloud and Olson, “Breckinridge was adept at taking complex issues and translating them into human terms as Murrow wanted.... Even the bastards in New York were forced to agree that Breckinridge was a success.” Murrow wrote to her a few weeks into her appointment, “Your stuff so far has been first rate. I am pleased, New York is pleased, and so far as I know the listeners are pleased. If they aren’t, to hell with them!”

Working alongside CBS's Tom Grandin in Amsterdam she made side trips to Norway, Belgium and Germany. At the latter she covered for William L. Shirer, another Murrow Boy, while he was away. She also renewed her friendship with Jeff Patterson, by then a U. S. diplomat based in Berlin. Romance developed. Breckinridge returned to Amsterdam and—six months after arriving in Holland—she literally escaped two days ahead of the Nazi army. CBS put her to work in Paris.

She wouldn't be there long; she and Patterson had matrimony on their minds. Her final CBS broadcast June 5, 1940 was about a French farming hamlet and the war's influence on its residents. When that aired, before boarding a Berlin-bound train, she cabled CBS: "Farewell Columbia. Have enjoyed working with you." The duo wed at the U. S. embassy in Berlin on June 20, 1940.

Breckinridge had tempted fate no fewer than three times, ostensibly possessing a penchant—and constitution—for it. She left Lucerne on the last train out after Nazi forces invaded Poland; she fled Amsterdam on the last train out of there in the nick of time; and she caught the last train from Paris straight away before France's collapse. Following her marriage, the U. S. State Department said it would be "unseemly" for her to write journalistically in the delicate prewar and wartime climate. She acquiesced to her husband's career although there were indications she would have preferred continuing to cover Europe for print media and CBS. ("I liked it more than any job I ever had," she said.) It wasn't to be. For 18 years she and her spouse traipsed the world on State Department business.

After his 1958 retirement they moved to Washington and resided in an old mansion in the capital's fashionable Massachusetts Heights section. At her memorial service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ex-congressman Clarence J. Brown Jr. (R-Ohio), stated: "Born to the silk of the wealth and historic reputations of two of America's great families and married into another, Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson might well have lived a life of private ease without any social significance or notable accomplishment." After becoming a grand dame of Washington society, nevertheless, she continued looking beyond herself. She wrote and photographed and shared her work with others while the two of them served on numerous boards, frequently of charitable and philanthropic proclivity. They held Kentucky Derby parties at their Washington home to benefit the Frontier Nursing Service.

Following his death in 1977 she began giving away real estate and exclusive art they collected around the globe. Their estate at York, Maine was gifted to Bowdoin College which established the Breckinridge Public Affairs Center. She signed over their 544-acre Point Farm in Calvert County, Md. to the state of Maryland, the largest single bequest it ever received. The state created Jefferson Patterson Park, a historic, environmental and archeological site as a result.

Breckinridge died at 97 in Washington on Dec. 11, 2002. At a memorial service a eulogist compared the intrepid journalist to the original Eve, contemplating the Apple of Life while thinking to herself, "Why not?" It seemed appropriate, considering the opportunities Breckinridge filled while investing her life. Her accomplishments are chronicled in a 1982 biography by Ann Denton Behlen, *Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson: From Career Broadcaster to*

*Career Diplomatic Wife*. The question she expressed again and again of herself “Why not?” is satisfied several times in its insightful pages.

Another Washington-journalist-turned-society maven, Nancy Dickerson, was born Nancy Connors Hanschman on Jan. 27, 1927 at Wauwatosa, Wis. Perhaps unaware of Breckinridge’s earlier audio journalistic accomplishments, she claimed in her 1976 memoir *Among Those Present* that she (Dickerson) was the “first woman reporter at CBS.” (*The New York Times*, The Paley Center for Media and other esteemed sources perpetuated the myth.) Despite her possibly well-intended but erroneous assumption, Dickerson’s contributions were consequential nonetheless. She opened doors, in fact, for lady reporters that had never been as widely parted prior to her arrival.

Educated for two years at Dubuque, Iowa’s Clarke College—an institution that would ultimately establish the Nancy Dickerson Whitehead Medallion to recognize outstanding mass communications students—she transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Madison where in 1948 she received a degree in Spanish and Portuguese. She taught elementary school in Milwaukee two years, 1949-51, temporarily moved to New York City and soon relocated in Washington where she worked for Georgetown University for a short while. Soon she accepted a research post with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and in the process cultivated a passion for government operations. Sometime later she enrolled in speech and drama classes at Catholic University, a pursuit that was to carry her into far-reaching territory.

Three years after arriving in the District, in 1954 Hanschman joined CBS’s Washington bureau as producer of dual radio series, *The Leading Question* and



*Capitol Cloakroom*. Later that year she added duties as associate producer of CBS-TV's *Face the Nation* to proliferating responsibilities, becoming a correspondent for the latter feature in 1960. As she became progressively more valuable to broadcasting, she covered political conventions, election campaigns, inaugurations, Capitol Hill, the White House, Congress and traveled the world accompanying presidents and other officials, reporting from Europe, the Middle East, the Far East.

In her personal life, in the 1950s Hanschman dated senators John Kennedy, Henry Jackson and Kenneth Keating. Still single at 35, in 1962 she wed wealthy real estate investor Claude Wyatt Dickerson. Indicative of her place in the capital's social firmament, she was feted on that occasion at a social event hosted by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg and Connecticut Sen. Abraham Ribicoff. Within a half-dozen years the Whiteheads produced two sons and three daughters. Both high achievers, those parents pursued challenging careers accompanied by an intense whirlwind social life, often leaving their offspring in care of live-in nannies.

The family and a staff of servants—cooks, housekeepers, butler, nannies—occupied a townhouse in Washington's Kalorama Triangle and a palatial McLean, Va. estate, Merrywood, purchased in 1965. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Princess Lee Radziwill had matured at Merrywood. When in town the Whiteheads frequently entertained at some of the area's most lavish parties benefiting the Washington elite. Regularly turning up at their events were Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Averell and Pamela Harriman, Walter Annenberg,

Charles Percy, Mark Hatfield, Edward Bennett Williams, Joseph Califano, Elliot Richardson and others of their high-powered stature.

After two decades of marriage, the Dickersons divorced in 1982. In 1989 Nancy married ex-Goldman Sachs chairman and current World Trade Center Memorial Foundation chairman John C. Whitehead and instantly added four stepchildren to her brood. Whitehead served on numerous boards, eventually becoming chairman of the United Nations Association of the U. S. Dickerson was still Whitehead's wife at her death, although—after 38 years in D. C., while continuing to own an estate in the area—from 1989 the couple maintained permanent residence in New York City.

Professionally, in 1963 Dickerson transferred her loyalty from CBS to NBC. For seven years she reported from NBC News' Washington bureau on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, *Today*, *Monitor* and other NBC series. After leaving the Peacock chain in 1970, a daily news program she hosted, *Inside Washington*, went into production in 1971, lasting to 1974. She founded the Television Corporation of America in 1980 to produce documentaries for PBS and syndicators. In 1982 she won a Peabody Award for "784 Days That Changed America—Watergate to Resignation," an account of the scandal that drove Richard Nixon from office. Dickerson capped her professional career as a Fox News commentator during election campaigns 1986-91. Along the way she served the Washington Press Club as vice president and a board member of the Hospital for Special Surgery and New York's Central Park Conservancy.

Her 1976 memoir, *Among Those Present*, reveals that *The Washington Daily News* once offered the intrepid global reporter a post as women's editor.

Having already predetermined her course in life, she refused: “It seemed outlandish to try to change the world writing shopping and food columns,” she chuckled. In 2006 youngest son John Dickerson, who followed her career as chief political correspondent of *Slate* and White House reporter for *Time*, acknowledged details of a strained relationship with his frequently absent mother until shortly before her death when they reconciled. At 14, he moved in with his dad following his folks’ divorce.

“My parents outsourced a lot of the child maintenance,” John Dickerson disclosed in *On Her Trail* about his famous mom. “A butler polished the leather in their Rolls-Royce and they flew off for beach weekends in a private plane. They lived in a very big house and their liquor was excellent. In Miami, Dad stayed in their apartment at the exclusive Palm Bay Club while his superstar wife stayed in grungier digs with her press colleagues.”

She died Oct. 18, 1997 in Manhattan at 70 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Her second spouse was an ex-Navy commander.

Breckinridge and Dickerson left big shoes for successors to fill. As pioneers among the women of broadcast journalism, they opened doors for those who followed while becoming some of Washington’s most prominent socialites. It was heady business—in dual realms.

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