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Capital Press Woman



Ruth Cowan: No one-woman club

Washington's newspaperwomen are about as rugged a set of individualists as the capital press corps can offer. Last week, one of the ruggedest of them became president of the Women's National Press Club.

She is Ruth Cowan, blonde, brusque, and fortyish veteran of the Associated Press's capital staff. No hair pulling, no unsheathed claw marked her election; it came by acclamation.

The versatile and aggressive Miss Cowan veered into newspapering via free passes to the movies, and since then has done about everything for the AP that its top newsmen could do. Born in Salt Lake City, Utah (but claiming San Antonio, Texas, as her home), Miss Cowan whisked through high school and college in five years. She taught history for a while and spent many an evening at movies on Annie Oakleys supplied by a reporter friend. Miss Cowan decided to become a movie critic, and did, for The San Antonio News.

Masquerade: After two years of this and general assignments, Miss Cowan turned up in Austin, Texas, covering the state legislature for the United Press. Her stories had gone out under the by-line "Baldwin (her middle name) Cowan." One day, a traveling UP executive phoned the Austin office and asked for "Mr. Baldwin Cowan." A sweet feminine voice answered, and the masquerade was over. The UP promptly fired Miss Cowan for impersonating a newspaperman.

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In an angry letter to the AP she told all about it and asked for a job. She joined the AP in 1929, spent most of the next ten years in Chicago, and held her own in the tough masculine league of gangland reporting. When the late Al Capone finally came to trial for income-tax evasion, Miss Cowan was there. On the night that the jury convicted him, the observant Miss Cowan dropped a neat tidbit into her story. Capone, she reported, was wearing new brown shoes which hurt.

In 1936, Miss Cowan rode the Landon campaign train. Three years later she went to Washington, covered Eleanor Roosevelt's press conferences, and both Republican and Democratic conventions in 1940, and started to badger the AP to send her abroad. In 1943, she went to North Africa with the first contingent of Wacs. She carried along her own supply of hair bleach. "Had to match my military credentials," she explained later.

For the next 28 months, Miss Cowan covered the war in North Africa, England, France, Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg. When her male colleagues wanted the inside story of life in a Morocco sultan's polygamous household, it was Miss Cowan who got it for them, since only a woman could visit inside a Moroccan home. With hapless PRO's, Miss Cowan waged constant war for equal rights with males in the matter of jeeps and other comforts of war reporting. She became the bane of any officer who sought to block her moving with the front lines.

In Washington last week, her fellow Press Club women looked for anything but a dull administration. "This is not going to be a one-woman spotlight," she promised, then added thoughtfully: "Might not be too comfortable."