Edee Greene
A Force for Women and Journalism in South Florida

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One part of orange journalism that is often left untold is the rich history of Florida women's page journalism in the 1950s and 1960s. In the years prior to the women's liberation movement, these women were working behind the scenes helping their communities, championing causes and improving women's page journalism. This was especially true as Florida's communities were growing. Other than wartime work, stunt girls, sob sisters and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's women-only press conferences, the only place for most women journalists for decades at metropolitan newspapers were the women's pages.[1]

The content of these sections consisted of society news, wedding announcements and the four Fs: family, fashion, food and furnishings. Yet, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, progressive content about domestic violence, pay inequity, and the need for child care was sprinkled among that traditional material. Women's page editors of Florida newspapers were leaders who worked quietly for change and developed a women's page network in the post-World War II years. As time went on, when their communities began to address gender inequalities, these women took on leadership roles.[2]

In Fort Lauderdale, that women's page journalist was Edee Greene. She changed the role of women's page journalism in her state and beyond, educated women's club members on how to improve their communities and advocated for women's rights. Greene won numerous Penney-Missouri Awards, the top national recognition for women's pages, in the 1960s—a time when Florida women's page editors dominated the Awards. She also spoke at the Awards' annual workshops about her section and thus influenced other women's page journalists. In the

1970s, Greene helped establish her community's first shelter for domestic violence victims. From its opening in 1974 through 2000, when Greene died, the shelter helped 246,000 women and children. In this and numerous other ways—Greene was a force for women. A former colleague of Green's said, "She worked one-on-one with scores of women to tell them they could have a better life."[3]

Rarely do women who wrote for women's pages get much historical acclaim; instead, these women are more often considered footnotes in journalism history.[4] Yet, in the 1950s and 1960s, women's page journalists were making a difference. They were winning Penney-Missouri Awards and creating a new direction for content being copied across the country. Greene's fellow South Florida award-winning women's page editors were Marie Anderson, Marjorie Paxson and Dorothy Jurney. Their positions, in terms of stature, at their newspapers varied. Decades later, when asked if the well-respected and typically progressive *St. Petersburg Times* was a leader in its treatment of women in the 1960s, newspaper executive David Lawrence responded that women's page editor Anne Rowe-Goldman could have been top editor of the paper, but never got the opportunity. He said, "The whole business was sort of shabby on the subject. Women made distinctly less, had lesser jobs, and did not have much of a path to get more responsibility and more money.[5]

Amid the fashion photos and the recipes found in the women's pages, questions about women's roles in the post-World War II era were beginning to take shape. Women's clubs, a staple in most communities, were making improvements and beginning to work outside the home. As has been noted, "The story of how women's civic associations changed in the 1950s is part of a larger narrative about American political development and the forces that shape political change."[6] These clubs took political and social stands, as well as raised money for social causes—this was especially true in Fort Lauderdale where women's groups were strong.[7]

Greene was a powerful force in Fort Lauderdale in an era when women rarely held official positions of power. Instead, many women were leaders behind the scenes. In one of the most obvious examples, Greene advocated for change through her coverage of women's clubs and local government. Her work resulted in the successful lives of many women and in the establishment of social services that continue to help women in the future. To this point, Greene's story is largely unknown. In

an oral history with her editor, Fred Pettijohn, Greene's name is not mentioned nor are most women working at the newspaper.[8]

This biographical sketch writes Greene back into South Florida and journalism history.

Becoming a Women's Page Journalist

Edith "Edee" Nielsen was born in 1914 in New Jersey. When she was 12 years old, she moved to Florida. Her journalism career began as a high school sports columnist at a Palatka, Florida, newspaper. After high school, she worked at radio station WSUN (standing for "Why Stay Up North") in St. Petersburg.[9] She wrote soap opera scripts and had her own movie show. While female voices were not common on radio news programs, many stations included a "women's program" or entertainment show with a woman as the announcer.[10] She also worked at a social services agency—likely opening her eyes to social problems in her community that she would later work to improve—and took a class in creative writing at a community college.

In 1933, she married Tom Greene. She dropped out of radio to work at her husband's advertising agency and raise three children. After 17 years of marriage, in 1950, her husband left her for the woman living next door. Divorce records show that Edee Greene did not request spousal support and thus was financially responsible for her children. (In a 1963 *Editor & Publisher* article, Greene was described as widowed by her first husband. Decades later, she characterized it as a miserable marriage that ended after 17 years, leaving her financially and emotionally drained.[11]) Her friend and fellow journalist Clair Mitchell noted that after the divorce, Greene "pulled herself up by her bra straps" and got a job.

To support her children, she became the women's page editor at the *Orlando Sentinel*. The lack of daycare and management support meant that few women's page editors had children. Other examples in South Florida include Marie Anderson, Roberta Applegate and Marjorie Paxson.[12] Women like Greene had to make their own way as they juggled motherhood and journalism careers. In 1955, Greene married the father of three and fellow *Sentinel* journalist Joe Rukenbrod. Greene noted that "with a name like that, it's natural I should work as Edee Greene."[13] He was an impressive journalist in his own right—covering

John Dillinger and President Franklin D. Roosevelt for the International News Service. He went on to become the *Fort Lauderdale News*' first South Broward editor.[14] Stories of her blended family were often featured in her popular humor column, "AhMen." Greene later noted in a letter that she had 11 ½ grandchildren: "you see he has three children and I have three but we BOTH claim all the grandchildren."[15] The couple remained married until his death in 1983.[16]

In 1957, the couple joined the *Fort Lauderdale News*. Bothered by the typically traditional content, Greene hoped to avoid the women's section. She later said, "I ran my legs off to keep from having to work in women's department."[17] She eventually left the city room to head the women's department in 1958 after being promised by executive editor Fred Pettijohn the opportunity to change the entire outlook of the section.[18] A year later, Greene launched her previously mentioned witty column, "AhMen." She covered numerous topics from local issues like coeducation[19] to journalism trends.[20] Her groundbreaking approach was rewarded with a full-page article in the industry publication *Editor & Publisher*. When Pettijohn was later asked about his push to hire women, he responded that from the time he was in a position of authority in the newsroom, he hired women.[21]

While her editor might have been supportive, Greene said she still had to work to improve the content beyond traditional coverage. For example, Greene said she would often find her own way to take a new, progressive approach in violation of the newspaper's old fashioned policies. When asked about the change, she would deny ever knowing the rules. To other women's page editors, she advised various approaches, including ignoring old policies until they disappeared: "But of course the best weapon is the sneak attack. Improve one area at a time—but don't let the top guns know what you're doing."[22] One of the areas she advocated was for the publication of photos of black brides in her section at the *Fort Lauderdale News*—something that was only done in a few progressive women's sections, as typically only white brides were featured.[23] Her success in integrating her section is now noted in the Fort Lauderdale school system's curriculum.[24]

Women's Page Content

Stories about club women were common in women's sections, especially following World War II as many middle-class women returned to the home, yet stayed active in their communities. Greene lectured other women's page editors at the national Penney-Missouri Award workshops about her approach to club coverage. She focused on educating publicity women about what was news.[25] Her approach to women's organizations was to coax the members into taking action on important issues in the community. She said to the journalism industry publication *Editor & Publisher*:

> Often instead of making headlines out of some uncovered shortcoming of the community, [the editor] investigates, then lays the facts before some organization that will set to work to correct the condition. The staff, then, reported on the work of the organization, letting its members take the credit.[26]

A common activity for women's page journalists were training sessions for women's club members. The training sessions taught club members about what topics were considered news and what kinds of programs or speakers the journalists were most likely to cover. The members learned the importance of correct spellings and the need to address news values, such as impact or conflict. Like others in the Florida women's page community, Greene held these workshops in Fort Lauderdale in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The invitation to club members, in the women's section, stated: "Clubs make news and news make clubs."[27] The two parties worked together to upgrade the quality of life in Fort Lauderdale and the quality of news in the women's sections.

A fellow advocate of progressive women's page journalism was Penney-Missouri Awards Director Paul Myhre. He was a close friend of Greene and a frequent visitor to his mother-in-law's home in Fort Lauderdale. The two often met to discuss how to improve women's sections. He wrote to Greene in 1966: "It's wonderful to hear what the Florida contingent is doing for this laborious cause. You and Marj Paxson thundering from Olympus in your territory and Gloria Biggs and Marie Anderson rocking the managing editors and women's editors on their heels in New York."[28] Evidence of that bond can be found in the saluta-

tions of the letters from Greene: "affectionately."[29] Or "love and kisses"[30] or Myhre's references to Greene as "chum."[31] Greene did not bother to wait for Myhre's trips to pay visits to his mother-in-law, as letters showed, further demonstrating the familial bonds within the women's page community and their advocate, Myhre.[32]

Educating the Industry

While women's page journalism was not well respected in the industry, the editors made attempts to change their status. In 1966, in hopes of educating editors on the topic, Paxson and Greene gave a presentation to a Florida state meeting of managing editors called "What's Wrong with Women's Pages." This was not their self-chosen title. Greene said: "I cried for a week when [her managing editor] Milt Kelly asked me to explain 'what's wrong with women's pages.' After ALL I had done. All the sacrifices I had made ..."[33] Their talk outlined numerous areas where they felt women's pages and the coverage of women could be improved. The first issue they focused on was the newspapers' emphasis on women's roles as wives and mothers:

> We thought they made a mistake when they allowed reporters to write something to the effect that 'although Edee Greene is a stock car driver, president of the Florida women's press club and women's editor of the *Ft. Lauderdale News*, she still finds time to be a wife and mother.'[34]

They turned the story around, asking whether male journalists would write a story explaining that Milt Kelly (Greene's supervisor) was a professional marksman, a fly caster, and a managing editor, and yet still found time to be a husband and father. More than twenty years later, Paxson observed that style of writing is "still being done and I still cringe. We may have come a long way but we have a long way to go."[35]

Paxson and Greene also encouraged managing editors to include fewer stories about brides and "club trivia" and more articles about medical, educational, economic and sociological issues. The two women also requested that the managing editors stand behind the women's page editors when they received irate phone calls from brides' fathers asking why

there was not space to write the details of their daughters' dresses. New job descriptions for women's page editors were also recommended. They thought a women's page editor should be a crusader, a newswoman who was alert to what was going on in her community, and a woman with an imagination who could localize the news content of the general wire stories in her section.

One of the leading networking opportunities for women's page editors was the journalism think tank, American Press Institute. At a 1965 A. P. I. workshop, Greene addressed how to use editing power to show the changing roles of women. She gave the example of questioning the language in a profile:

> So she's a mother and a career woman—must we say "*she also has time* to cook for her husband Paul and rear three children Danny 5, August 16 and Percy 18"?[36]

A year later, Greene attended the A. P. I. session on women's pages and recalled the editors predicting the changing of the sections that would occur over the next few years.[37] The two-week seminar also included Florida presenters Marie Anderson of the *Miami Herald*, Gloria Biggs of the *St. Petersburg Times* and Dorothy Jurney of the *Miami Herald*.[38]

Networking and Advocacy

The South Florida women's page editors of the 1950s and 1960s were a socially active group. Letters between the women describe elaborate gatherings and frequent lunches. Greene wrote of her lunches with *Sun-Sentinel* women's page editor Beverley Morales and her dinners with *St. Petersburg Times* women's page editor Marj Paxson—both fellow Penney-Missouri Award winners. Of a particular 1965 meal with Paxson, Greene wrote: "I showed her the new light fixtures I've bought for the dining room and kitchen and she showed me the speech she's written [for the female-based journalism organization, Women in Communication, Inc., convention]. It was a mutual admiration society."[39] The lives of these women, like the sections they oversaw, were a mix of the traditional, like the furnishings Greene was proud of, and the advocacy for women they championed, reflected by Paxson's speeches.

Helping women was central to Greene's women's section and to her advocacy. She was instrumental in establishing a home for victims of domestic violence that still exists today: Women in Distress of Broward County, Inc. Greene, along with a group of others, established the shelter in a four-bedroom house in July 1974. Greene was spurred to action after a woman came to the door of a Fort Lauderdale shelter with her children. She had been brutally beaten by her husband. Because the shelter was not then licensed to take minors, her children were put into foster care. The separation from her children was too much, and she returned to her husband. A week later, he shot and killed her in front of their children. The tragedy led to a 62-bed facility emergency crisis center that included room for children.[40]

Part of the catalyst for the shelter was a Fort Lauderdale task force, Community Service Council, headed by Greene. In another example, the committee did a survey of Florida courts to find out which judges addressed domestic violence. They found it never happened. This was at a time when violence against women was rarely discussed and rarely did stories on the topic appear in the news section. Greene said of the survey results: "It did not occur to them that these women were scared to death."[41] The shelter continued to fundraise and to create programs for women.[42] Today, the center is a prototype for domestic violence shelters across the country.

Greene and the other women at the *Fort Lauderdale News* found their own way to honor the March for Equality in 1970—the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage. The entire female staff wore pantsuits to work.[43] (This was at a time when the question of pants was as much about fashion as it was a gender-role debate.) The mediated concept of feminism was not one that some women's page editors were ready to embrace. In her later years, Greene said, "I've been described as a women's libber. I don't think I am."[44] Likely, it was some of the methods and images associated with the women's movement that Greene objected to. Yet, Greene's advocacy fit the goals of the women's movement. Greene was known for collecting giraffe figures as "you have to stick your neck out to accomplish anything."[45]

As the decade of change wore on, Greene continued to take on more visible roles outside the newspaper. On one occasion, she and Virginia Shuman Young, the first female mayor of the city, fought against the proposed male-only policy for the Tower Club at the top of the Landmark

Bank building. Greene said, "When we heard it was going to be a restaurant for men, we told the owner that if he tried it he'd have two grandmothers picketing on the sidewalk."[46] These women understood it was their maternal roles that afforded them a certain amount of clout in taking a stand—maybe more so than their roles as journalist and politician.

Mentoring Women

Greene's advocacy for women also occurred in her part of the newsroom. She was well known for her mentoring of young women. (At this time, there were no men in the women's sections.) For many new high school or college graduates, society writing was a foot in the door of a newspaper at a time when other sections were not hiring women. The often detailed work of these sections was good training for young reporters. Beginning reporters are often encouraged to work the local government or police beat to gain their training, but Greene pointed out that writing up engagement and wedding announcements also provided "invaluable training in accuracy."[47] No reporter wanted to get the phone call from an angry bride with a misspelled name. And, of course, a mistake in a recipe would lead to numerous calls and letters of complaint. She encouraged fellow women's page editors to become mentors: "Sitting by you, she catches your excitement—your love of your job—your desire for perfection."[48]

Greene was also welcoming to women journalists who had children. This was at a time when few women journalists had families. However, several South Florida women, such as Morales and Greene, raised children while working at newspapers. They often noted that this was a benefit—allowing them to find new story ideas and relate to their readers. Jurney, who had one stepchild, said in a 1978 speech that the roles of wife and mother in the lives of women added to their journalistic abilities—allowing them to place more of an emphasis on human concerns.[49] Greene often wrote about her own family and the parenting skills of her friends. In one 1960 column, she told the story of a rebellious teenage son and his guest. Greene wrote about his mother, "Being a forthright woman she straightened him out about the rights of teenagers and the responsibility of guests."[50]

Retirement

In 1976, Greene was forced out of her job after 17 years at the Fort Lauderdale newspaper due to new ownership and a forced retirement policy. (The newspaper went under in 1992.[51]) She was 62 years old. Rather than retire, Greene went on to become the director of public relations at a Florida college.[52] She continued working in public relations for more than a decade before retiring again. Throughout those years, she continued to stay active in her community. She also continued to have fun—learning the Macarena and entertaining a new boyfriend. A friend noted, "She's a magnet for people who like to laugh and have fun."[53]

As the years went by, accolades for Greene began rolling in. In 1986, she was honored by the National Organization for Women Broward County for her work promoting awareness of women's rights.[54] In 1992, she was inducted into the Broward County Women's History Coalition's Hall of Fame. The following year, Greene celebrated her 80th birthday with a fundraiser for the shelter she helped found in 1974. During the circus-themed event, Greene arrived on the back of an elephant. As she dismounted, she announced, "If I'd known it was so much fun, I'd have done it 50 years ago." The event raised $10,000 for the shelter.[55]

Greene worked hard to avoid the tradition of the women's section only to find her calling there. She trained women's club members to take on projects in her community and then rewarded them with media coverage. Her column, filled with humor rather than a collection of names, made her a local celebrity. She took charge when needed—helping to create a domestic violence center or threatening to picket a restaurant that excluded women. While much of journalism history portrays women's page editors as powerless and inconsequential, journalists like Greene helped change the course of their communities, helping hundreds of women along the way.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2009 Florida Conference of Historians. Much of the information about Edee Greene comes from the papers of Marie Anderson, Dorothy Jurney and Gloria Biggs at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri.

Endnotes

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