

Dolph Simons, Jr. – Lawrence Journal-World - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” That was the cry of the newsboys of yesteryear, when newspapers would put out special editions with breaking news. Today we'll learn about a Kansan who got his start in the newspaper business in just that way, and developed his family's paper into one of the leading newspapers in the state. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dolph Simons Jr. is Chairman and Editor of the World Company, which publishes the Lawrence Journal-World and other newspapers. He comes from a long line of pioneering Kansans.

One of his ancestors – the widow of his great-grandfather – came to Kansas to homestead after the Civil War. She moved to a sod house near the rural community of Jetmore, which now has a population of 933 people. Now, that's rural. Here this brave woman raised five children on the wilderness of the Kansas plains.

One of her sons, W.C. Simons, was home-schooled and spent a few years in a Salina school. After working briefly in St. Joseph, Missouri, in December 1891 W.C. journeyed by horse and buggy from St. Joe to Lawrence, Kansas where he and two partners started a newspaper.

“There were seven newspapers in Lawrence at the time,” Dolph said. “They started the eighth. W.C. was twenty years old. They started with fifty dollars in capital.”

In 1892, they published the first edition of the Lawrence World which would join with many other newspapers through the years.

“Over the decades, as many as fifty or so newspapers merged into what is now the Lawrence Journal-World,” Dolph said. W.C. Simons was joined in the business by his son Dolph and his grandson Dolph Jr. who started his sixty-plus years with the paper as a carrier.

On December 7, 1941, all the Simons family members were at W.C.'s home for their weekly Sunday dinner. A news flash came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. "We're putting out an extra," the older newspapermen said. The younger Dolph was eleven years old.

"Dad gave my brother and I each a whistle," Dolph said. "We went out on the streets and started selling the extra edition." It was his first direct introduction to the world of journalism. "I was hooked," he said.

Dolph grew up in the business. After graduation from KU, he worked abroad as a reporter for the London Times and later the Johannesburg Star in Africa. He then came back to Lawrence and worked his way up through the family newspaper business, now known as the World Company. He became President of the company in 1969 and editor of the paper in 1978.

"News is my first love," Dolph said. "I like to write." He oversees the staff and still writes a weekly editorial.

In 1979, Dolph talked to Allen Neuharth of the Gannett company which was developing the idea of a nationally distributed newspaper: USA Today.

“I told him, if you want to have a print site in the middle of the U.S., I’d love to have a shot at it,” Simons said. “I promised to have the best print site of any non-Gannett print site in the country.” Today Gannett has 32 print sites around the nation. Dolph has been true to his word.

Page design is done in a newsroom in northern Virginia and transmitted by satellite to Lawrence and other print sites around the nation. Presstime begins at 10:30 p.m. Then the new edition of the papers is distributed regionally, from Des Moines down to Oklahoma.

Dolph is very involved in his community and has received many honors. As president of the Kansas Press Association, he was the fourth KPA president who was son of a former president.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” That was the cry of the newsboys of yesteryear, and that was how Dolph Simons Jr. got his start. We commend Dolph Simons Jr. and all those involved with the World Company for making a difference with their longterm commitment to the newspaper industry. Success has come through “extra” effort.

And there’s more. Can a newspaper co-exist with a cable television company? We’ll explore that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.