



By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

Sarah McClendon addresses the President at his press conference last Tuesday.

Stridently Seeking the News

Mr. Nixon had a very ready rejoinder for this lady, who has been known to give rudeness a bad name at times.

—CBS' Eric Sevareid's instant analysis following President Nixon's Feb. 25 press conference.

By Jeannette Smyth

Every time they hear there's going to be a presidential press conference, Sarah McClendon's two maiden sisters telephone her from the Victorian family home in the Victorian town of Tyler, Tex., to say, "Sarah, are you going to behave yourself? Are you going to get your hair fixed? You be nice to Mr. Nixon now."

But Miss McClendon, the 62-year-old veteran reporter for the North American Newspaper

Alliance and a string of five small newspapers—the Sherman (Tex.) Democrat, El Paso (Tex.) Times, Oshkosh (Wis.) Northwestern, Anaheim (Calif.) Bulletin and Temple (Tex.) Telegram—which currently subscribe to her Sarah McClendon News Service, usually doesn't.

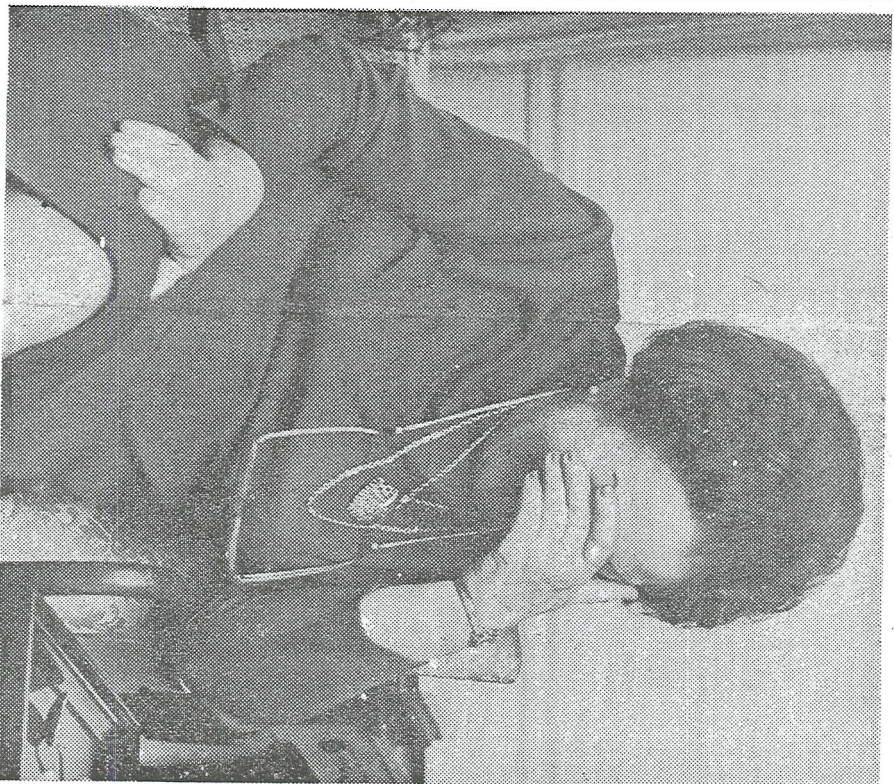
Last Monday she put on a purple dress, shouted down all the other reporters, shook her ballpoint pen at the President of the United States, told him he was being misinformed and asked a tangential question about delays in G.I. Bill tuition checks.

That's precisely why she is legendary among politicians and the White House press corps: the raucous voice, the accusatory tone, the some-

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PEOPLE

THE WASHINGTON POST
Saturday, March 2, 1974 B 3



Photos by Ken Fell—The Washington Post
“Activist journalist” Sarah McClendon: “I could have asked Mr. Nixon half a dozen questions on which he’s misinformed and thinks he’s doing a good job . . . I have to have something that’s not duplicating the wires.”

times obscure issues she raises. She's been riling Presidents since Truman's days, the most notable incident being in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy rebuked her publicly when she asked him about "two well-known security risks" she said were working in the State Department security office.

Miss McClendon talked recently about her latest sortie over tea and Lorna Doone biscuits in her genteel little townhouse near the Sheraton-Park Hotel.

"I could have asked Mr. Nixon half-a-dozen questions on which he's misinformed and thinks he's doing a good job," she says. The veterans' issue "just happened to be the one I knew most about," so she used it as an example of the issue she was concerned about: the President's being misinformed.

But it's typical of Sarah McClendon to think of herself as a spokeswoman for veterans, or women, or United States citizens, because she regards herself as an "activist journalist." She's also a veteran, having served with the WACs during World War II.

During that time, she was married briefly to a man who left her for another

woman while she was pregnant. She concealed her pregnancy; her daughter, Sally, was born June 3, 1944; she was honorably discharged from the WACs two weeks later.

As an activist, Miss McClendon went so far as to try to run for Congress once. Around 1958 or 1960—she can't remember exactly—she spoke to a Southern regional conference of Republican women who encouraged her to run. She decided to oust Rep. Ray Roberts (D-Tex.), her hometown congressman.

The Texas Republicans asked her who would contribute money to her campaign. "I couldn't ask anybody for money," she told them. "It'd be selling my soul."

She couldn't get money from the House Republican Campaign Committee either. Then-Rep. Gerald Ford (R-Mich.) told her that her district was not crucial for Republicans to win. "I think he knew I would be a very undisciplined member of the party," she says mischievously.

"I'm so glad I didn't run.

Because now I can go to the President of the United States and get something done."

"The thing that hurts me is when I'm not as effective as I'd like to be because I don't have the outlets," says Miss McClendon. Her five papers have a combined circulation of 147,311.

So she yells because she works for small newspapers; she asks obscure questions because she has to sell exclusives to editors who already use United Press and

Associated Press wire services. "I have to have something that's not duplicating the wires," she explains.

She remembers one crusade she brought to the attention of a Nixon counselor, who finally said, "Sarah, we might have done something about this man at the Pentagon if you had more readers."

Ironically, the counselor was Clark Mollenhoff, who resigned in 1970 to return to his job as Washington bureau chief of the Des Moines (Iowa) Register (circulation

238,833). He is that other rude, noisy reporter at presidential press conferences.

(President Nixon: "Well, you're so loud, I'll have to take you." Mollenhoff: "I have to be, because you happen to dodge my questions all the time, Mr. President.")

Sarah McClendon's small-town stridency, if that is what it is, antagonizes those who don't regard her as a buffoon. White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler treats her "as if she were a wino who had wandered in

off she street," writes press critic Timothy Crouse.

In his book, "The Boys on the Bus: Riding With the Campaign Press Corps," he attributes the attitude to male chauvinism and says Miss McClendon and other newswomen wrote "some of the toughest pieces on the 1972 Nixon campaign," precisely because they were outsiders who had developed "a bold independence of thought which often put the men to shame."

"Clark Mollenhoff has to

yell to be recognized and nobody laughs when he asks stupid questions," says Wauhillau LaHay, veteran Scripps-Howard reporter. "I think if Sarah were a raving, sexy dish, she'd be taken more seriously."

"The President has not said he thinks she's rude," deputy press secretary Gerald Warren says cautiously. "He understands that all reporters are individuals and have individual styles in seeking the news."