

## Purely Personal Piffle”: Legacy Construction of Ruth Lovrien Conner, Midwestern Journalist and Linotype operator (Theresa Russell-Loretz)

### Abstract

“Purely Personal Piffle. . . This is written on our birthday—and the cards and phone calls ease a bit of the irritation we often feel: IF we hadn’t had seven children and had been able to work steadily, would we now be able to be doing what we really want to do?”

Ruth Lovrien Conner wrote this at age 62 for her column “Hanging on the Clothesline.” The column ran consistently in the *Des Moines News*, a weekly newspaper she co-owned with her husband in West Burlington, Iowa, from 1956 – 1972.

Known as Ruth Conner by readers of the *News*, her public lament encapsulates the struggles of women who strive to achieve renown through professional work even as they jockey social expectations of “good” mothers and wives – particularly in the 1960s.

At the same time, her words echo the thwarted desire of 18-year-old Ruth – expressed in the *News Writer* in 1924 – to write for a metropolitan daily. That dream was frustrated by familial duties even before her marriage, though she was born into a newspaper family.

Indeed, as the oldest child of E.E. and A.C. Lovrien, publishers of the weekly *Ellsworth News* (Ellsworth, Minn.), Ruth gained entry into the newspaper business through her parents, learning to write copy and run the Linotype. Those services, plus her role as eldest daughter of 10, meant her desire to attend college and head to work on a daily paper’s news staff remained stifled by family demands – until she turned 21 and headed to Dunwoody’s Technical School to obtain a certificate in Linotype operation.

The Linotype certificate offered her a ticket to work in a job that commanded a salary equitable to men, and for three years, she worked at a variety of newspapers in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa until she met her husband, Hal, while both worked at a newspaper in South Dakota. Over the next 40 years they moved throughout the Midwest hoping to launch a successful weekly, while Ruth continued writing correspondence and Hal worked printing jobs. In fact, *The Des Moines Register* reported that Ruth and Hal were “drenched in printers’ ink.”

While Ruth bemoaned her lack of agency over a professional legacy that fulfilled her early dreams, ironically, she ably constructed a narrative that provides historians fodder for unveiling the unique yet emblematic experiences of a woman who entered a male dominated enterprise in the 1920s, and her subsequent work in journalism as a linotype operator, journalist, freelancer and country correspondent, editor, and proofreader over 70 years.

Upon her death in 1989, Ruth Lovrien Conner’s obituary reflected her life as an exemplar of women journalists whose career centered around newspapers in small mostly rural communities. Further, her work with larger dailies in the Midwest, such as *The Omaha World Herald* and *The Des Moines Register*, were done as she balanced family responsibilities and periodically participated in continuing education through professional associations, such as Iowa Press Women.

The work behind this presentation is part of a book-length case study of the life of Ruth Lovrien Conner. For this presentation, I intend to focus on how published stories by and about her might be supplemented with personal insights about her experiences in letters to family, and how these public presentations collectively presented a legacy that sometimes contradicted the “Purely Personal Piffles.”

An examination of the life of Ruth Lovrien Conner fills in gaps of women journalists who contributed to a significant but understudied (hence invisible) area of journalism history – rural weekly newspapers. Moreover, while historians have noted women often entered the journalism profession through fathers or husbands, other scholars have noted that the history of women in journalism needs to move beyond study of firsts and build history that rises to the “transitional” stage

advocated by Gerda Lerner wherein we learn about how the experiences of women were different from men, and how that may have impacted journalism as it was and is practiced.

### **Bio**

Dr. Theresa Russell-Loretz is an associate professor and former chair of the Department of Communication and Theatre from 2014-2022. Her research interests include rhetorical approaches to Public Relations; Organizational Identity and Recruitment; Feminist Perspectives in/on Public Relations; Oral histories; Journalism History; Media Depictions of Educational Leaders; and Emergency Managers' perspectives on the role of communication in their work. She has worked with a number of local nonprofits, offering workshops on the role of communication in advancing the mission of community benefit organizations. Dr. Russell-Loretz currently serves on the Editorial Board of the [\*Journal of Public Relations Research\*](#)