

Excerpt from Oral History Interview with Agness Underwood

Natalie Holtzman interviewed Agness Underwood in 1976 for a thesis project at CSUN. Underwood, a woman whose story was not well documented, was one of a few women who achieved high status as a journalist, ultimately becoming editor of the Los Angeles Herald Express. In the clip, Underwood discusses her start in journalism as a typist, and how she first got her byline.

Transcript:

NH: Miss Underwood, how did you begin in the newspaper business?

AU: Well, I had a friend who was a telephone operator at the old Los Angeles Record, which was in existence at the time that I started, in 1926, and she knew that things were pretty rough in our family. I had two small children and things were very bad at that time. And they wanted a relief telephone operator. I had gone through telephone school with her and she knew that I could run the switchboard, so she called me and asked me if I wanted a couple of weeks work. I worked those two weeks and then Gertrude Price, who was Cynthia Gray on the Record, which was a Scripps-Canfield paper and had a Cynthia Gray on every paper, had the Christmas free-baskets coming up. And she asked me if I wanted to work with her on the Christmas basket stunt, food to poor people and toys to children and that sort of thing. So I worked with her from the vacation relief period until after Christmas. Then she asked me if I would like to work for her personally, two hours a day every—five days a week for five dollars a week incidentally—uh, just typing letters that came to Cynthia Gray, so that she could paste them up and send them to the composing room. Well, I didn't know how to type but I two-fingered it and my two hours a day work often stretched into four or five, and my five dollars a week I gave to a neighbor next door to take care of my two children until I came home. So it actually was costing me carfare to go to and from work, I was losing that much. But it was such interesting work and I just loved it so I stuck with it.

NH: How'd you get started though as a reporter?

AU: Well, she worked me gradually into her department and then Rod Brink, who was city editor, used to call on me once in a while to take dictation on—from a reporter who was out on a story. And one day he came over and said that “We have an old gentleman over here who says he planted the first cotton in California, would you interview him and write us a story? If you write a good one I'll give you a byline.” Well at that point I didn't even know what a byline was, so when he left I asked Miss Price what was a byline, what was I supposed to do? But I interviewed the old gentleman and that was my first byline.