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“John Hlavacek”

Omaha Press Club Hall of Fame member John Hlavacek will speak at the Norfolk Public Library on Thursday, May 12 at 6:30 pm. He recently answered questions about his experiences as an author, a war correspondent, news bureau chief and freelance writer/photographer and reporter for KMTV in Omaha.



How and when did you start writing as a career?

I did not, still do not, like to write! In 1944, a banker friend invited me and the far eastern manager of United Press to dinner. I asked, "Mr. Morris what does it take to become a United Press correspondent?" He asked, "What have you done?" My reply- "I taught English and I speak Chinese." "You're hired." Thus I joined United Press without any news writing experience ever.

How did you get into freelancing?

Before leaving New York, I had contacted Time/Life, NBC News, the New York Daily

News, and other newspapers, to be their correspondents in the Caribbean. Fortunately, my wife, Pegge, was a brilliant writer, and so we soon developed a news bureau in Kingston, Jamaica, covering stories literally throughout the world for the likes of Time/Life, NBC radio news, and stories of celebrities for Miami and New York newspapers.

We didn't know when we picked Jamaica that it would soon become a mecca for stories for freelancers. We were able to interview General Fulgencio Batista when he fled Havana after Fidel Castro came into power.

Because of my previous background in India, I was sent by NBC back to India to cover the escape of the Dalai Lama in Assam in 1959.

What have been your favorite writing assignments?

In India, I was able to write Tenzing Norgay's story of his climb on Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary. At the time, all of the British and New Zealand climbers were under contract with the Times of London and the Royal Geographical Society

In 1968, I spent a week in Antarctica, courtesy of the Navy and the National Science Foundation. The Navy flew us to the South Pole on a C-130 and let me sit in the nose so I could film the glaciers.

Because I have lived so long, I am now one of two American journalists who walked with Gandhi.

What do you enjoy about living back in Nebraska after all the places you've been?

Living in Nebraska, after spending half my life in Asia and the Caribbean, has been wonderful. Omaha is a great city, with an airport large enough to connect to any place in the world in a few hours. From Omaha, my wife and I traveled the world on assignment. We have spent a summer behind the Iron Curtain, spent another summer hitch-hiking through East, South and West Africa, travelled to almost every country in South and Central America, and every country in Asia, except Laos, as well as Australia and New Zealand. We have been to see such interesting places as Easter Island, the Galapagos, Machu Picchu, and all of Europe and Russia. In addition, I was able to report from Vietnam every year from 1965 to 1971.

What advice would you give to someone who wanted to be an international writer?

First, a complete study of the English language, reading, writing, and speaking. Then, pick a place you, and your potential audience, will find fascinating. Contact your local newspaper, or radio or TV station, and ask to be a "stringer." And hope that they use what you send. I'm assuming somewhere you have had a "job" which has been able to give you a fund of money to live on until your efforts produce the necessary money to live on.

I was "lucky". I never considered it hard to be about and living in hammocks or on the beach; that was part of the story. The hardest part is when you expected your efforts to be rewarded, but they were rejected. (Save them for another day.)

Tell us about your family:

During my time in India, I had time to court and marry Pegge Parker, an American newswoman who was a Vice Consul and Press Officer for the American Consulate in Lahore, Pakistan.

Pegge was the widow of CIA operative and atomic spy Douglas Mackiernan (the first CIA agent to be killed in action and the first to be honored on the Wall of Honor at CIA Headquarters.)

You raised five children in "Freelancing in Paradise". Do any of them write and how were they influenced by that experience?

Suzanne, who was born in Bombay, has had experience as a script writer in Hollywood, and has co-written a dog training book, "Smarter Than You Think" along with animal trainer Paul Loeb. Daughter Mary Mackiernan is a doctor in Kauai, Hawaii (radiologist) and son James is a doctor in Salinas, California (anesthesiologist). John Patrick is a United Airlines Captain flying 777's from Washington to South America and Europe. Michael is a stock broker in Las Vegas.

What will you be speaking to the group at the Norfolk library about?

I will be speaking about my career such as it has been. From teaching English to Chinese elementary age children, to driving charcoal-burning trucks over the Burma Road in southwest China delivering supplies to clinics and hospitals for a relief organization, to working for the American military Attaché in Chungking, to joining United Press as a war correspondent in the China Burma India theatre, to eventually becoming a television news analyst

and arriving in Nebraska after living all around the world. Actually, I grew up in Illinois near Chicago, went to college in Minnesota (Carleton College in Northfield) then lived in China, India, Jamaica, and finally Omaha.

Are you still writing for publication?

In the last ten years, that I have been able to write my memoirs because of the communication and technology revolution. Before computers, it took a great deal of money and a publisher to publish a book. Now with print on demand publishing, anyone can write and publish a book. It's only the writing, rewriting, and editing that takes the time (and money).