

## From Kansas City, Missouri

### Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America

Walter Cronkite was one of the first broadcast journalists on American television. He is best remembered as the anchorman and managing editor of the CBS Evening News from 1962 to 1981. His high journalistic standards and his ability to communicate complicated events to the general television audience made him a familiar and trusted figure to millions of American viewers.

Walter Leland Cronkite Jr. was born on November 4, 1916, in St. Joseph, Missouri. He was the only child of Walter Cronkite Sr., a dentist, and Helen Fritsche Cronkite. He spent much of his early life in Kansas City. Though he would go on to travel the world, Cronkite remained proud of his Missouri roots and always considered Kansas City his home. Naturally curious and observant, he kept a notebook throughout his youth to record daily observations and often researched in encyclopedias to learn more about subjects that interested him. Since his parents struggled financially, Walter worked many odd jobs to make extra money.

Shortly after returning to Kansas City, Cronkite took his first television job covering news in Washington, DC, for a group of Midwestern stations. In 1950 he joined the new CBS television network. He excelled at connecting with the television audience and decided to stick with television journalism after the birth of his second daughter, Kathy. His skillful coverage of the 1950 congressional elections earned him a national reputation. Although Cronkite was technically not the first television “anchorman,” the term was most famously associated with his style of political reporting. Soon he was more famous than many of the candidates he was covering. Cronkite anchored coverage of every political convention and national election (except the 1964 Democratic National Convention) for the next thirty years. He also interviewed every U.S. president from Truman to Reagan.

On March 15, 1962, Walter Cronkite became the anchorman and managing editor for the CBS Evening News, a position he held until 1981. During this time, his news program became the one most watched in America. Cronkite was known for his calming presence and his ability to communicate complex events to the average viewer, who trusted “Uncle Walter” to explain the major events of the era.

Cronkite’s heartbreaking report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy became one of the most famous news reports in television history. Because of his in-depth coverage of the Apollo Space Program, especially the Apollo 11 moon mission in 1969, he was called “The Dean of Space.” His special report from Vietnam is

credited with helping to change national opinion about the war. Cronkite resisted the Nixon administration's attempts to intimidate the media and won awards for his reports on the Watergate scandal that ended Nixon's presidency. Under his leadership, the CBS Evening News also devoted much attention to the civil rights movement and environmental concerns. Walter even used his influence to set up peace talks between the leaders of Egypt and Israel. Because he often stayed on air for long stretches while covering special events, he was nicknamed "Iron Pants."

Because Cronkite made a point of carefully checking his sources and trying to report breaking news in a fair and impartial manner, the American public put great trust in his nightly sendoff, "And that's the way it is." In 1972 an independent opinion poll named Cronkite "The Most Trusted Man in America," a reputation he would keep for the rest of his career.

Cronkite trained himself to speak at a rate of 124 words per minute in his newscasts, so that viewers could clearly understand him. In contrast, Americans average about 165 words per minute, and fast, difficult-to-understand talkers speak close to 200 words per minute.

### **Faith**

Walter Cronkite's family was Protestant and changed their denomination three times while he was a child. Cronkite joined the Episcopal Church as a youth, explaining in a 1994 interview: "I got into a Boy Scout troop that met in an Episcopal church. The church had a wonderful minister who was also the scoutmaster. And I suppose you can say he proselytized me. At any rate, I was much involved with the church, and became Episcopalian. Later, when I worked for a paper in Houston, I was church editor for a while. The Episcopal House of Bishops met in Houston one year, and I became intrigued by the leaders of the church."

### **Retirement**

On February 14, 1980, Cronkite announced that he intended to retire from the CBS Evening News; at the time, CBS had a policy of mandatory retirement by age 65. Although sometimes compared to a father figure or an uncle figure, in an interview about his retirement he described himself as being more like a "comfortable old shoe" to his audience. His last day in the anchor chair at the CBS Evening News was on March 6, 1981; he was succeeded the following Monday by Dan Rather.

### **Cronkite's farewell statement**

"This is my last broadcast as the anchorman of The CBS Evening News; for me, it's a moment for which I long have planned, but which, nevertheless, comes with some sadness. For almost two decades, after all, we've been meeting like this in the

evenings, and I'll miss that. But those who have made anything of this departure, I'm afraid have made too much. This is but a transition, a passing of the baton. A great broadcaster and gentleman, Doug Edwards, preceded me in this job, and another, Dan Rather, will follow. And anyway, the person who sits here is but the most conspicuous member of a superb team of journalists; writers, reporters, editors, producers, and none of that will change. Furthermore, I'm not even going away! I'll be back from time to time with special news reports and documentaries, and, beginning in June, every week, with our science program, Universe. Old anchormen, you see, don't fade away; they just keep coming back for more. And that's the way it is: Friday, March 6, 1981. I'll be away on assignment, and Dan Rather will be sitting in here for the next few years. Good night.

## **Death**

In 2005, Cronkite suffered a great personal loss. His beloved wife Betsy died of cancer at the age of 89. Four years later, in mid-2009, Cronkite was reported to be ill with cerebrovascular disease. He died at his home in New York City on July 17, 2009, at the age of 92. He was buried next to his wife at their family cemetery plot in Kansas City, Missouri.

And that's the way it is: Walter Cronkite—famous from Missouri.

Article Source: State Historical Society, Wikipedia. Photos: NASA, Wikimedia

## **Photo captions:**

“Walter Cronkite was one of the closest friends I had in journalism,” said Graham. “He was an icon. I doubt if anybody will replace him in the hearts and minds of Americans. I respected his views on so many subjects.”

In Graham's remarks, the world renowned evangelist recalled how touched he was by Cronkite's more recent role in “Ruth and Billy Graham: What Grace Provides,” a 2002 documentary about the Graham couple that Cronkite narrated and also appeared in to reminisce about his own relationship with his friends the Grahams.

St. Bartholomew's Church in New York, which the Cronkites attended for many years.

“From the earliest days of the space program, Walter brought the excitement, the drama and the achievements of space flight directly into our homes,” said NASA Administrator Charles Bolden

**Blurb:**

“When Cronkite resigned in 1981, it was like George Washington leaving the dollar bill.”

SENIOR MOMENTS ARCHIVES