

**The Participant Observer: Journalist J.B. Kendall
as a Social Research Practitioner in Old Time Radio's *Frontier Gentleman***

Jefferson Spurlock
Director
Hall School of Journalism & Communication
Troy University
Troy, AL
spurlock@troy.edu

“Herewith, an Englishman’s account of life and death in the West. As a reporter for the London Times, he writes his colorful and unusual accounts. But as a man with a gun, he lives and becomes a part of the violent years in the new territories.”

—The opening line to each episode of *Frontier Gentleman*,
written by Antony Ellis (1958)¹

Each December, most American television audiences are exposed to *A Christmas Story*, the classic 1983 holiday movie in which Ralphie and Randy sit on their living room floor, staring at a big brown box without a picture. The sound of the *Little Orphan Annie* series blares out of the radio’s speaker. That was a typical setting from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s during the Golden Age of Radio or Old Time Radio, as it was also known. Audiences were entertained by shows such as *Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy*, *Suspense*, and *The Cisco Kid*. *Frontier Gentleman*, about a British journalist in the American Wild West, was one of the popular programs that lasted only one season, from February 2, 1958 to November 16, 1958 for 41 episodes.

This essay examines *Frontier Gentleman* and its main character, J.B. Kendall, and determines whether Kendall was a typical reporter during the time and if he carried the label of unobtrusive observer or participant observer in social research practice.

Participant Observation Versus Unobtrusive Observation

In social research practice, “participant observation is used to study situations or organizations,” according to communication scholars Rebecca B. Rubin, Alan M. Rubin, and Linda J. Piele.² The researchers actually take part in the environment they are observing. Sociologist Ashley Crossman notes that weaknesses exist with this type of observation by suggesting that it is time consuming because the researchers must spend weeks or months living in the places of study. Additionally, she writes, “Researchers may lose their objectivity by becoming too much a part of the group they are studying.”³ Psychologists Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter utilized the participant observation practice when they studied a small cult that thought the world would end soon, only to be disappointed when it did not.⁴ Stanford University psychologist David Rosenhan studied first-hand how staffs in mental institutions processed information about patients. The researchers had themselves committed to mental hospitals even though they were not actually ill.⁵

Unobtrusive observation, on the other hand, “is used when researchers want to study communication in a natural setting, yet choose not to become participants in the group or organization.”⁶ Disadvantages with this approach include the fact that “interpretation of physical traces or observations may be from the point of view of the stranger or outsider and therefore may fail to grasp important in-group meanings.”⁷ The Web Center for Social Research Methods cites two 2006 studies of unobtrusive research gathering. One deals with radio station listening preferences. Researchers went to local car dealerships and auto garages “and checked all vehicles that were being serviced to see what station the radio was currently tuned to.”⁸ Another one occurred when researchers

examined readers' magazine preferences by rummaging through the trash of the sample and staging a door-to-door magazine recycling effort.⁹

The Journalist on the American Frontier (1800-1860)

Media historian William F. Huntzicker suggests, "Working within a national tradition that has promoted western expansion and development, the press played a significant role in the settlement of the American West. Colorful editors and their Wild West stories are part of frontier lore."¹⁰

The role of journalists is to tell others what they have heard and/or observed with accuracy and objectivity as two of their expectations. Additionally, they help shape public opinion and influence how people think while being monetarily compensated to do so. Popular culture author Joe Saltzman observes, "Journalist heroes use words to help neighbors, to right wrongs, to stop injustice, to do what is fair and right. The journalist hero is convinced that the ends, the triumph, of right over wrong, justify any means, no matter what the ethical or moral cost may be. They believe in and embrace the public interest."¹¹

It was the same in 19th century America. "The idea of improving a people's image through a newspaper had become a common premise of frontier journalism," notes Huntzicker.¹² During this time, journalists lived on shoestring budgets and often were of lower social levels than local merchants. Journalists also served as printers on the side while managing to teach, practice law, or run the local post office for additional revenue. On top of that, frontier journalists had to "contend with unreliable mail and transportation, batter political opponents, and face violence."¹³ Special correspondents "had stronger powers of imagination than observation, and most reporting was biased."¹⁴

Literary journalist Howard Good also notes that the frontier correspondent was categorized as a crusader. He writes, “The crusader often arrives in town a stranger ... he finds a community controlled by greedy businessmen or corrupt politicians or machine gun-toting gangsters. Acting as an extralegal force, he routs the evildoers. He is a messianic figure who materializes out of nowhere to break the midnight conspiracies that rule the sunlit streets and to protect the innocent and defenseless from the depraved and strong.”¹⁵

Northwestern University journalism professor Loren Ghiglione echoes that by penning, “The crusaders cut their eye-teeth on causes: abolition, equality for women, a new social order, political revolution. They often worked outside the journalistic mainstream.”¹⁶

On the use of firearms, almost everyone carried them in the wilderness to defend themselves against Indians, outlaws, and wild animals. But it was different in the cities and towns. UCLA law professor Adam Winkler notes that guns were prohibited in those locales. He writes, “Certain places required people to check their guns at one of the major entry points to town or leave their weapons with their horses at the livery stables ... Visitors were welcome, but their guns were not.”¹⁷ In frontier towns, people could not walk around like the Cartwrights in *Bonanza* with guns attached to their waists. “If a cowboy wanted to have his guns on him, he’d have to be out in the wilderness, away from town folk. If he wanted to drink some whiskey and play some poker at the saloon, he had to leave his guns behind,” Winkler says.¹⁸

Research During the Golden Age of Radio (1930-1960)

In 1937, the Rockefeller Foundation commissioned a group of noted scholars,

including Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril and future CBS President Frank Stanton, to examine the effects of the mass media on society, especially radio. Named the Radio Research Project, the group looked at radio soap operas and examined listening habits that were instrumental in the creation of survey and focus group research. The Project also examined the audience effects of the 1938 broadcast by Orson Welles of *The War of the Worlds*.¹⁹

Aside from the Radio Research Project's efforts to study early radio, little scholarly research has been conducted to examine some of the popular shows during the Golden Age of Radio, such as comedies, crime serials, and Western dramas.

Frontier Gentleman (1958)

Radio was seeing a decline in listenership by the time *Frontier Gentleman* arrived on the scene on February 2, 1958 on CBS. Media studies writer Bob Stepno suggests, "From the scripts and acting to the cinematic musical score, *Frontier Gentleman* was an example of mature state-of-the-art radio storytelling just before American radio drama as a genre disappeared in the glare of television."²⁰ Still, *Frontier Gentleman* attracted audiences even though *Gunsmoke* was on television during the same year. *The Six Shooter*, another weekly radio Western, ended its run in 1954 after 39 episodes.²¹

Veteran actor John Dehner starred as J.B. Kendall, *Frontier Gentleman*'s Cambridge University-educated former British army officer who was a special correspondent for the *London Times*. Kendall reported on the American Frontier, specifically the Montana and Wyoming Territories during the 1870s. The series, based on scripts by Antony Ellis, lasted only one year in 1958 for 41 episodes.

In November 1958, *Frontier Gentleman* was replaced by *Have Gun Will Travel*

(with Dehner playing the role of Paladin), but not because there was a problem with the show. More likely, the studio wanted to double down with *Have Gun Will Travel*, which was a top rated television show from its start in 1957. It's one of the few TV shows to have spawned a popular radio show.²² CBS Radio cancelled all of its radio dramas in 1960 because of the popularity of TV.²³

Kendall's confident, well-articulated voice overshadowed the rough vocal tones of many of the town's residents in each episode. After all, he was university educated whereas many of the locals did not have the ability to read well, if they could read at all. Kendall was paid by the *London Times* for each story he sent. If the *Times* did not like what he wrote, he received nothing. Nevertheless, Kendall always had money to travel, to gamble, to engage in a gold prospect, even once to pay for information for a news story. Armed with a gun, the good-looking Kendall often used it or was able to handle himself well with his fists.

Over the years, movie audiences have been entertained by adventures of the Wild West. *Shane*, *High Noon*, *The Gunfighter*, and Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns are just a few. Western film screenwriter Frank Gruber notes that there are only seven basic cowboy tales: the railway story, the cavalry versus Indians story, the ranch story, the cattle empire story, the outlaw story, the marshal story, and the revenge story.²⁴ Most of these films follow a typical formulaic pattern. The hero (usually a lone drifter) arrives into town and soon faces conflict (generally a gang versus one man). Most of the local residents (including law enforcement staff) are frightened of the outlaws, but do little to stop them. The hero will then rid the town of the villains before moving on and heading to another town to face similar challenges.

Popular culture writer Jerry Glynn writes, “The underlying themes of these films is often how established but primitive ways of life and routine conflict when confronted with social or technological change, most commonly depicted by conflicts between settlers and natives or ranchers and the impending Industrial Revolution.”²⁵

Frontier Gentleman was a radio program but its primary character, J.B. Kendall, was also armed with something else that Western movie protagonists did not have—paper and a quill. This essay examines three 1958 episodes of *Frontier Gentleman* (“Big Sam for Governor,” “The Trial,” and “Justice of the Peace”) and argues that journalist Kendall was depicted more as a participant observer than as an unobtrusive observer.

“Big Sam for Governor” (written by Antony Ellis and aired March 16, 1958)²⁶

This was the seventh episode of the *Frontier Gentleman* series with J.B. Kendall (gun in hand) riding into the mining town of Helena where he is soon approached by Big Sam Hobday, a large, outspoken, corrupt individual who “tells the town when to breathe.” Aided by his two dimwitted sidekicks, Hobday indirectly runs the town whose residents are not used to saying no to him. Hobday recently struck it rich with a gold discovery and decides to run for governor. He offers Kendall \$2,500 to write a flattering article about him and his aspirations to become governor, but Big Sam will dictate what is mentioned in the story. Unfazed, Kendall refuses his offer, saying, “I don’t write what people want me to write ... I write only the way I see things and not the way you [Hobday] want me to.” Hobday is irritated with Kendall, so he assaults the reporter and the town’s sheriff.

With a gun at his head by Hobday’s assistants, Kendall decides to write an article about Big Sam, using flowery prose and his own imagination. Seeing a chance to make a

move, Kendall overpowers the sidekicks and orders the sheriff to arrest Big Sam and his henchmen. A judge finds Hobday and his men guilty of assault and places them in jail for a week and fines them \$200 each. Big Sam no longer has control over the town and its residents rally behind the sheriff and Kendall.

“The Trial” (written by Antony Ellis and aired April 13, 1958)²⁷

In the eleventh episode of the series, Kendall makes his way to Ft. Benton in the Montana Territory to cover a murder trial that will soon be taking place. He is surprised to see the defendant, George McEwen, sitting in a local newspaper office (and not in jail), armed with two pistols and a shotgun. McEwen, a tough man “who likes folks to know it,” says no one is going to put him behind bars unless he is proven guilty of shooting local resident Jack Furlong to death.

Since no one agrees to serve as McEwen’s attorney, Kendall decides to take the case, even though he is not a trained lawyer. Kendall says he knows enough legal terms to get by. The saloon is the site of the courtroom and most of the town’s folks are present. Sounding more like a baseball game than a courtroom proceeding, the trial gets underway. Eleven witnesses testify, but none actually saw the shooting. They simply wish to see McEwen hang.

When the prosecution’s lone eyewitness, Ike Dollish, takes the stand, he testifies that he was standing near McEwen when the shooting took place. Kendall discovers the witness is color-blind and could not accurately identify McEwen’s clothing at the time of the crime. Kendall then reveals that Dollish killed Furlong because the deceased had a crush on Dollish’s wife. McEwen, who has kept his guns by his side throughout the trial, is found not guilty and Dollish is arrested. Kendall’s courtroom activities mirrored *Perry*

Mason episodes where the knowledgeable defense attorney always reveals the real murderer (who is not his client) and makes the police and prosecutor look stunned, confused, and embarrassed.

“Justice of the Peace” (written by Antony Ellis and aired May 13, 1958)²⁸

In this twenty-third episode, Kendall takes a stagecoach to interview Amy Robinson, a justice of the peace in the Wyoming Territory of Dry Creek. He tells her that many of the women readers of the *London Times* would be interested in a story about a female justice of the peace. Kendall finds controversy in the town where Jack Red Dog, an Arapaho Indian, is accused of killing local man, Ike Haney. Most of the town’s outlaws plan to hang Red Dog without a trial, despite Robinson’s orders. The local male residents have no respect for Amy as justice of the peace since she is a woman in what the town’s folks call “a man’s world.”

By now, Kendall has been appointed as a temporary deputy sheriff and tries to take Red Dog to another town to avoid a lynching by the local mob. However, the Dry Creek men capture Red Dog and hang him. When another resident of Dry Creek finds out that Red Dog has been killed, he tells Kendall and Robinson that the Indian was not guilty. Instead, Red Dog was drunk and asleep when Haney was shot to death.

Kendall finds out that one of Dry Creek’s residents, Tip Butler, is responsible for Haney’s murder because the deceased would not take Butler in as a business partner. When Haney’s brother tries to kill Butler, Kendall shoots Haney in the arm. Robinson then has Butler arrested, tried, and convicted. Butler is hanged a few days later and the town soon supports Robinson in her position as justice of the peace.

Conclusion

The literature has shown that most reporters during 19th century America were not well paid, but J.B. Kendall always had money—and plenty of it—for traveling, gambling, paying for information, and other ventures. Scholars have noted that special correspondents in the 1800s often wrote biased and imaginative stories. This was almost a trademark of Kendall's.

The typical journalist, like most regular citizens during the 19th century, did not carry firearms in public. In fact, they were prohibited in most towns. Kendall, though, was always armed with a gun. Additionally, Kendall's initial motivation at the beginning of each episode was to be an unobtrusive observer, to visit a new area, and to find a story of interest to pass along to his readers in London. It did not always turn out that way. Kendall would immediately become involved in the story as a participant observer, as shown in episodes where he temporarily served as a lawman or an attorney.

Frontier Gentleman generally followed the traditional Western movie formula. Kendall would come into a new town in each episode where conflict generally awaited him. He would confront the villains and eventually get rid of them—running them out of town or to a jail cell. Then, Kendall would leave the location for another town that would be the venue for the next week's episode.

Historical fictionalized accounts of actual events have been mainstays of many novels, films, and radio for decades. *Johnny Tremain*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Saving Private Ryan* are just a few. *Frontier Gentleman* is another to add to the list. J.B. Kendall was a fictional character, but similar stories to his were the typical accounts of Western life in the mid-19th century. The daily reporters during the

time usually were not participant observers like Kendall. However, it appears that writer Antony Ellis did not have this in mind when penning *Frontier Gentleman*. He wanted a journalist to be the hero, even if it called for him to be right there taking part in the action. Ellis also knew that his audiences were not entirely familiar with the typical correspondent of the time. So what if a reporter carried a gun in public. Every citizen did just that in shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. After all, J.B. Kendall was part of the West and to depict him as being a bit wild was the right ingredient for an entertaining series.

Endnotes

¹ Antony Ellis, *Frontier Gentleman* on CBS Radio (1958).

² Rebecca B. Rubin, Alan M. Rubin, and Linda J. Piele, *Communication Research: Strategies and Sources* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 198.

³ Ashley Crossman, "Participant Observation: Becoming a Part of the Research," <http://sociology.about.com/od/Research/a/Participant-Observation.htm>. (October 2012).

⁴ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956).

⁵ David Rosenhan, "On Being Sane in Insane Places," *Science*, vol. 179 (January 1973): 273.

⁶ Rubin, Rubin, and Piele, 198.

⁷ Allan Kellehear, *The Unobtrusive Researcher: A Guide to Methods* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 7.

⁸ Web Center for Social Research Methods, "Unobtrusive Measures," <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/unobtrus.php>. (October 2006).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William J. Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press: 1800-1900." In *The Media in America: A History*, edited by W.D. Sloan (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2008), 179.

¹¹ Joe Saltzman, "Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture: A Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media," *The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* website, 2005, online at <http://ijpc.org/uploads/files/AEJMC%20Paper%20San%20Antonio%20Saltzman%202005.pdf>.

¹² Huntzicker, 182.

¹³ *Ibid*, 188.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 190.

¹⁵ Howard Good, *Acquainted with the Night: The Image of Journalists in American Fiction, 1890-1930* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 49.

¹⁶ Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 39.

¹⁷ Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 166.

¹⁹ EconomicExpert.com, "The Radio Project," <http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Radio:Project.html>. (February 23, 2014).

²⁰ Bob Stepno, "Newspaper Heroes on the Air: *Frontier Gentleman*," <http://jheroes.com/adventure/westerns/frontier-gentleman/>. (May 1, 2014).

²¹ *Frontier Gentleman*, <http://www.otrcat.com/frontier-gentleman-p-1300.html>. (September 19, 2010).

²² Eddie's Old Time Radio: *Frontier Gentleman*, on Eddie's Old Time Radio website, 2014, online at <http://www.eddiesotr.com/Frontier-Gentleman-Radio-Show-p/frontiergent.htm>.

²³ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 742.

²⁴ Biography for Frank Gruber (Western novel author and film screenwriter), on 2014 IMDb website, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0344246/bio>.

²⁵ Jerry Glynn, "Exploring the Western Movie Genre,"
http://www.cowboyconflict.net/199700_exploring-the-the-western-movie-genre.
(August 24, 2008).

²⁶ Antony Ellis, "Big Sam for Governor," *Frontier Gentleman*, aired March 16, 1958.

²⁷ Antony Ellis, "The Trial," *Frontier Gentleman*, aired April 13, 1958.

²⁸ Antony Ellis, "Justice of the Peace," *Frontier Gentleman*, aired May 13, 1958.