

Betty Whitney's Legacy was Her Life

A generous bequest from the estate of Betty Whitney '35 is the largest single monetary gift ever received by this Association, but her true legacy is a life lived to the highest ideals of a Framingham alumna.

by Stephen W. Herring '76

The 1935 edition of *The Dial* contains a class prophesy that predicts graduating seniors Betty Whitney, a nutritionist, and her friend Margaret Manvel, a chemist, will have a career researching and discovering new vitamins. As it turned out, in the case of Betty Whitney, her life unfolded as something far more diverse, interesting and fulfilling than any prognosticator could have imagined at that time. During her long career in nutrition she was also a wartime Army officer, television pioneer, advisor to a king, and an avid traveler to distant and exotic parts of the world. It is a life of many dimensions that reflects the well-rounded liberal education Framingham is famous for.

Betty was born Adah Elizabeth Whitney in Elmhurst, New York, on April 20, 1913. Although born in New York, she was the child of Massachusetts parents and grew up in the Bay State cities of Springfield and Pittsfield. She was the second of three children, born between two brothers—Leonard, a year older, and Gorham, eight years younger. By the time she was ready to enter college, the domestic sciences and home economics programs at the Framingham State Teachers College were well known. She chose Framingham even though the state college at Westfield was much closer to home. At Framingham she and her Pittsfield friend Margaret Manvel would be known as the “Berkshires girls.”

Betty earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics and Nutrition at her 1935 graduation. In those four years she demonstrated an interest in all aspects of campus life just as she would keep expanding her horizons in later life. She participated in twenty forms of student activities including sports (baseball, hockey, volleyball), student government, and *The Gatepost*. She was on the Chemistry Council all four of her undergraduate years, and was no doubt a star pupil of beloved Chemistry professor Dr. Stuart Foster.

After graduation, and probably with encouragement from Dr. Foster, Betty spent a year as a dietetic intern at the University of Michigan Hospital at Ann Arbor, earning certification at the end of that time. She returned to New England to launch her career as a dietician at hospitals in Connecticut. Four years later she moved into the business world as an administrative dietician for G. Fox & Co., the big Hartford department store. This took her into the opening months of World War II, when she decided to offer her skills to the war effort.

During the war Army hospitals were organized into field and evacuation hospitals near the front lines, larger station hospitals in the theaters of war, and big general hospitals like Cushing General in Framingham. Betty Whitney, as an Army second lieutenant, was assigned to a station hospital in England where she served as a medical dietician for the duration, rising to the rank of captain by the time the war was over. This exposure to a foreign country probably sparked an interest in other parts of the world that was to play a major role in Betty's future career and personal decisions.

After the war Betty worked for the National Dairy Council and was a Home Economist for Kraft Foods. A new age was dawning for America and a new technology called television was at the center of it. The opportunity to become a pioneer in this new medium opened up for Betty in

1950 when she joined WBKB in Chicago to host her own show called “Tel-A-Shopper.” She presented and demonstrated products that viewers could call in to buy, a concept that would become a staple of TV viewing many years later with the HSN and QVC networks. “Tel-A-Shopper” was a half hour show that ran every weekday morning.

As exciting as this new TV venture was for Betty, it did not build on her training and career experience in dietetics. After two years in front of the camera, an even more exciting opportunity came along, one that would put her back on her career track. In Saudi Arabia, where oil had recently been discovered in great abundance, a conglomerate of American oil companies set up business as the Arabian American Oil Company, or Aramco, headquartered in Dhahran. They established their own hospital and needed a dietician. In April, 1952, Betty Whitney relocated to Dhahran, a company town set between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Desert, where she would follow her career for the next sixteen years.

Saudi Arabia’s first king, King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, was elderly and ailing at the time. According to an account Betty shared with the Alumni Association in 1970, the king summoned the new Aramco dietician to Riyadh for a consultation on his diet. Luncheon plans had to be hastily modified when the royal party realized the dietician was a woman, and the king would never dine with a woman. She enjoyed a much more relaxed luncheon with some young and charming doctors, consulting with the king after dining. Later, when the king was a patient at the Aramco hospital, she was given the dubious distinction of taster of royal meals lest any assassin attempt to poison him!

Aramco allowed its employees a three-month vacation every other year, and Betty made the best of that time traveling the world. She reported to the Alumni Association on trips to Thailand and Hong Kong, and a two-week sojourn in Japan. In India she was able to view the Taj Mahal by moonlight. Another trip took her to Switzerland, Germany and Austria. It is this interest in world travel that inspired the IAFSA Board to use a part of Betty’s bequest to provide grants “to enable students, alumni, and faculty to pursue academic interests that require travel.”

Betty retired in 1968, choosing to live in Rockport, Texas, near the Gulf of Mexico, finding many volunteer opportunities there, including work with the Girl Scouts, the public library, and county medical services. In 1981 she moved farther south to a retirement community in Weslaco, Texas, near the Rio Grande River, where she was active in many capacities including, of course, food planning for the medical center.

During her retirement years Betty traveled the United States; she came back to Framingham many times for Alumni reunions and to visit with Dr. Foster. In 1985 at the fiftieth anniversary of her graduation, the Association acknowledged her accomplishments with an alumni achievement award. She passed away on April 18, 2006, two days shy of her ninety-third birthday. Betty Whitney lived a full and rewarding life largely made possible by her Framingham education, which not only gave her the knowledge and skills of her vocation, but the values and ideals that have enriched the lives of so many Framingham alumni.

The Independent Association of Framingham State Alumni was honored to be remembered in Betty Whitney’s will. Her generous gift of \$1.4 million will enable us to continue our programs of service and benevolence, as we keep her memory alive.