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## Bess Whitehead Scott

DEBI MARTIN

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The scene plays like an old Katharine Hepburn movie on the late-late show. The year is 1915. The picture is in black and white. A spunky young woman is telling a gruff old editor that she wants to be a reporter. This is news to him. A female reporter. No such thing, he says. He looks up at her through his glasses, which seem to be forever perched on the edge of his nose, and leans back in his large swivel chair. He tells her that women at his newspaper, like they do at most papers, only write about women's social clubs.

Although she is feeling desperate, she doesn't let it show.

She gathers her wits and tells him that the war is coming soon. The men will be leaving. Women will have to be trained to take their jobs.

The editor is impressed that she not only knows what is going on in the world but also will not give up.

"I all but hit him over the head," said Bess Whitehead Scott, a 98-year-old free-lance writer living in Austin. "He said that I had a two-week trial run and that

he'd pay me \$6 a week, not bad money in those days."

That's how Scott became the first female reporter on a newspaper in Houston and one of the first women in the print media in Texas.

Although she had no experience in journalism—she did not even know how to type—and had a hearing disability in one ear, her confidence and wit won over *Houston Post* managing editor Harry Warner.

Scott tells of the prominent people she met, good times she had, and the hardships she faced as a career woman before, between, and after two world wars in *You Meet Such Interesting People*, her autobiography published last month by Texas A&M University Press.

Long before women entered the work force in large numbers, Scott was a career woman in a field dominated by men. After working for the *Post*, Scott was employed by *The Houston Press* as a news reporter, features writer, columnist, and department editor. In 1929, she returned to the *Post*,



Bess Whitehead Scott today.

where she worked until 1945. Clark Gable, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson are just a few of the interesting people she met and interviewed along the way.

She has run an advertising agency and written two high school journalism textbooks. She has worked as a publicist in Dallas and a scriptwriter in Hollywood. For four years, she was the editor of *Texas Woman*, a state publication for members of Texas Business and



*Lila Danforth and Bess Scott near San Diego, California, in 1922.*



*Photos courtesy of Texas A&M University Press.*

Professional Women. Her articles have also been published in *The Dallas Times Herald* and *Kansas City Star*.

Scott worked as a journalist before television news teams could beat a paper to a story, before the advent of radio, before the widespread use of telephones, useful when contacting sources. When she needed a quote, she had to hit the pavement and go find the source.

Her desire, always, was to be a writer. Not one of those who sits alone and authors works from their imagination. She wanted to be a witness to history in the making, to be near to and to write about the real people and happenings of her times. Writing was to be her meal ticket to a more exciting life than that which could be experienced on the rural farm she came from in Blanket, Texas.

Houston in 1915 was not the sprawling metropolis it is today, but it was, with a population of 78,000, already one of the largest cities in the nation.

For her first assignment, Scott was to write a caption that would run under a photograph in *The Houston Post*. She thought she knew what Warner wanted, but she wasn't sure. He told her, "Remember, you are on your own. I'm a busy man; don't ask me any fool questions."

She didn't.

Her first big break as a news-woman came three months later, when a tidal wave engulfed Galveston.

"I got my first byline on this one," Scott said, still proud of the story. "It was a story any reporter would love to have. A tidal wave had hit Galveston in 1900, and 6,000 had died. They made this sea

wall, and here it was fifteen years later, and another tidal wave hit," and about three hundred died.

"My story was on a sixteen-year-old girl who was the only person to survive in her family of a mother and father and two sisters and a brother. She had grabbed a piece of furniture and floated on it out in the Gulf for thirty hours. For hours and hours, she didn't know if she was going out to sea or headed toward the shore. When she finally hit shore, it was night. She just sat there and cried for a long time. Then she told herself to stop. She told herself to just 'Hush.'"

Scott interviewed the young girl while she lay bundled in blankets.

Another break for Scott came when the Southern Baptist Convention chose to meet for the first time in Houston. The reporter usually covering the beat said he could use some help. Scott said she could do it.

"Mr. Warner looked at me through those glasses of his—he was as baldheaded as an egg, and he had a big mustache. He turned to me and said, 'What do you know about the Baptists?' I told him that I was born and bred a Baptist. I got the assignment and wrote everything in longhand until I learned to type."

Her hearing problem did not interfere with her work. It served to make her more determined and inventive. At press conferences, if she could not hear the speaker, afterwards, she would go up to the podium and conduct one-on-one, on-the-spot interviews to get her story.

Gradually, the men in the



newsroom, most of whom smoked cigars and wore trench coats and brim hats—just like they did in the movies, Scott said—began to notice the female cub reporter.

“For a good while they were standoffish, and I just ignored them like they ignored me. When, finally, the city editor gave me a desk and a typewriter and a beat, the boys began to decide that I was all right. I never felt discriminated against in any way except in terms of pay. As long as I worked, I never got what the men got for doing the same kind of work, and sometimes I did it better.”

Her salary at the *Post* was never more than \$37.50 a week. During the Depression, it was cut to \$27.50. Back then, women were more interested in marriage and children, not careers, said Scott, who once turned down a marriage proposal from a man because he expected her to quit working once they married. He was shocked. Women, back then, did not act so spunky.

She was born before the turn of the century, on December 13, 1890. Her parents were Southerners. Her mother had been born on a cotton plantation near Rome, Georgia, in 1855. Her father had been born on a tobacco plantation. He fought in the Civil War in battles at Bull Run and Gettysburg.

Scott was her mother’s ninth child. At age 12, she nearly died when she caught the measles. The disease permanently damaged her hearing.

She attended public school in Blanket, where she was admonished by an English teacher for turning in a love story when an

essay was required. The teacher accused Scott of stealing the story from a dime-store magazine. It was an original, by Scott.

In 1911, she graduated from Baylor Female College, where she excelled in Latin and Greek and enjoyed playing basketball and tennis. She put herself through college by working two hours each week for room and board. Her brother Jess had sold two mules to pay her tuition, which was \$108.

At Baylor, Scott met her life-long friend Lila Danforth, who would later help Scott when she had to rear her children without a husband.

In 1918, Scott married a man that she now figures must have been an alcoholic. They had two children. In 1926 he disappeared, and Scott never saw him again.

“I would never have left my husband because he was an alcoholic. He was not abusive. He loved all of us very much, but he just did not have the will to conquer his problem, and we did not have in those days the opportunities that we have now. I’m sure there was Alcoholics Anonymous, but even then, there was a stigma. If you joined AA, it was almost as shameful as being a drunk.”

She never married again. She considers her wayward ex-husband to be the love of her life.

“I had a few proposals and a lot of propositions,” said Scott, with a laugh as she flashed her big, sweet grin. “I just didn’t think anybody would think as much of my children as I did. I devoted myself to them. I didn’t trust any man to do that with me.”

Rearing two children on a reporter’s salary was difficult, Scott said. But she had help. When her husband left her, Scott moved in with Danforth for a while. Later, Scott’s mother lived with her and helped rear the grandchildren while Scott worked late at night covering school-board meetings and interviewing celebrities.

These days, Scott lives in a retirement center that overlooks Town Lake. She doesn’t look too long at the view; she suffers from vertigo and worries that she will someday fall down and break a hip.

She has outlived her children but has five grandchildren, thirteen great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild.

She is in good health. She has lived this long, she said, because of her upbringing.

“We were raised in a fine family where people did square dancing and the church was the center of everybody’s life. I never smoked or drank, and I eat right.”

Besides *Such Interesting People*, she has written *The Way it Was*, an informal history of her family. She teaches a writing class to senior citizens, free lances articles, and is considering writing another book, tentatively titled, *If Life is So Good and Pleasant at 98, Why Not Try for 100?*

“I am very proud of the fact that, even through the Depression, I always worked,” she said. “I can’t just lie on a couch. It’s just not my nature. I got to be busy with something. I’m just an average, ambitious girl who still has some life in her.”

