

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Bette Graham, Inventor and Businesswoman, 1924-1980

Bette Graham wanted to be an artist, but circumstances intervened. She dropped out of school to marry when her boyfriend was deployed in World War II. War's end found her divorced with a small son to support. Bette moved from San Antonio to Dallas, attended secretarial school, and rose to the rank of executive secretary in a bank.¹

She proved to be adept with the new electric typewriter, but fixing mistakes was a problem—hand-erasing left ugly smudges. Bette knew that artists often paint over unsatisfactory parts of their canvases. “I decided to use what artists use. I put some tempera water-base paint in a bottle and took my watercolor brush to the office, and used that to correct my typing mistakes.”² Soon every secretary in the office was begging for a bottle of the magic fluid.

Hoping to market her invention, she converted her house into a production facility. A high school chemistry teacher helped improve the formula into a faster-drying solution. Bette blended ingredients with her kitchen mixer. Using a catsup squeeze bottle, son Michael transferred the batch into tiny bottles to sell as Liquid Paper.

Bette's break came in 1958, when an office magazine featured Liquid Paper as a “new product of the month.” A flood of orders followed from major corporations including General Electric, General Motors, and Bethlehem Steel. Production increased fifty-fold from 100 bottles per week in 1958 to 5,000 bottles per week by 1964. As it outgrew its home base, the operation expanded into several portable buildings. In 1968 Bette established a fully automated plant, and in 1975 she inaugurated a 35,000-square-foot international headquarters in Dallas that could churn out 25 million bottles per year.³

Bette was a millionaire but also a dedicated Christian Scientist who believed in corporate ethics. The new headquarters was designed as a comfortable work environment with airy corridors, potted plants, and art by Bette and others. Workers had access to an on-site library and child-care center. Bette retired as chair of the board in 1976 and set up two foundations, the Betty Clair McMurry Foundation and the Gihon Foundation, to promote women's welfare and support their efforts in business and the arts.

A side note: Bette's son, Michael Nesmith, became a member of the popular '60s pop group The Monkees.



Quotations

Most people in my income bracket build estates. I can't understand why. My estate will be what I can do for others. I want to see my money working, causing progress for people.⁴

I didn't have a fellow at that time. So I had to do it myself. I had to . . . appreciate that, as a woman, I was strong, complete, adequate.⁵

Photo

Sanford Corporation, Oakbrook, Illinois; photo from Texas Woman's University, Denton.

Endnotes

¹ Major source for information in this article is Mary Beth Rogers, Sherry A. Smith, and Janelle D. Scott, *We Can Fly: Stories of Katherine Stinson and Other Gutsy Texas Women* (Austin: Ellen C. Temple, 1983), pp. 89-97. Other sources include Nancy Barker Jones, “Graham, Bette Clair McMurray,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/GG/fgr90.html> (March 30, 2005); Lori Grossman, “To Err Is Human, to Correct, Divine,” *Texas Highways—Speaking of Texas*, <http://www.texashighways.com/currentissue/department.php?dept=speaking&id=160> (October 12, 2005); “Spotlight on Bette Graham,” <http://www.geocities.com/stephanieslight/bettegraham.html?200511> (October 11, 2005); and “Who was the inventor of Liquid Paper?” *Essortment*, http://tntn.essortment.com/inventorliquid_ridn.htm (October 12, 2005).

² Quote by Bette Graham appears in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 90; in Grossman, “To Err Is Human,” *Texas Highways Online*; and in “Spotlight on Bette Graham,” *Geocities online*.

³ Dates and statistics are from Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, pp. 92-93, 98.

⁴ Quote by Bette Graham appears in Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 97; and in “Spotlight on Bette Graham,” *Geocities online*.

⁵ Quote by Bette Graham from Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 91.