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## Betty White (1922–2021), Ms. Television

By George “Matt” Patino



*Figure 1. Betty White (1922–2021). Courtesy of Alan Light, Wikimedia Commons<sup>1</sup>*

Time is relative, especially when examining a life. While ninety-nine years is inarguably a long time to inhabit this earth, the end still came too quickly for many of Betty White’s fans.<sup>2</sup> For more than eighty years as a television mainstay, she helped shape the medium that became synonymous with her life. As such, Betty White deserves the title of “Ms. Television” for her contributions to the medium as a talk-show host, actress, creator, producer, and

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Light, “Betty White,” *Wikimedia Commons*, January 2, 2022, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Betty\\_White\\_1988\\_Emma\\_Awards\\_\(cropped\\_2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Betty_White_1988_Emma_Awards_(cropped_2).jpg).

<sup>2</sup> During her time in the public eye, Betty White created a level of familiarity even among people that might not consider themselves fans. Therefore, Betty White will be referred to by her first name as homage to her legacy.

game-show contestant.<sup>3</sup> Beginning her career in 1939, only twelve years after the first demonstration of Philo Farnsworth's (1906–1971) television, Betty logged several “firsts”: she was the first woman to appear on television, produce a nationally televised show, star in a sitcom, and receive an Emmy nomination.<sup>4</sup> Betty's active role behind the scenes challenged the traditional roles of women and marginalized groups in the entertainment industry. She became television's first gender and racial equality advocate as well as a loveable antagonist, whether by intention or coincidence.

On December 31, 2021, Betty Marion White (1922–2021) died at her home in Los Angeles, California just shy of her one-hundredth birthday.<sup>5</sup> She was born to Horace White (1899–1963) and Christine (Tess) White (1899–1985) on January 17, 1922, in Oak Park, Illinois precisely eleven months after their wedding. Betty's family moved from Oak Park to the Beverly Hills section of Los Angeles while she was still a toddler.<sup>6</sup> Although she was an only child, she described herself as never “lonely in the forlorn sense.”<sup>7</sup> She had many friends, but she was incredibly close to her

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<sup>3</sup> Milton Berle (1908–2002)—the broadcast form's first star—was known as “Mr. Television” due to his strong presence during the first Golden Age of television in the 1940s and 1950s. Brynna Johnson, “Milton Berle: Mr. Television and Uncle Miltie,” The American Vaudeville Museum, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://vaudeville.sites.arizona.edu/node/84>.

<sup>4</sup> In 1927, Philo Farnsworth invented the first working version of the electronic television. Mitchell Stephens, “History of Television,” Grolier Encyclopedia, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://stephens.hosting.nyu.edu/History%20of%20Television%20page.html>; “Pioneers of Television: Betty White – First Lady of Television,” PBS International, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://pbsinternational.org/programs/pioneers-of-television-betty-white/>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Severo and Peter Keepnews, “Betty White, a Television Golden Girl From the Start, Is Dead at 99,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/arts/television/betty-white-dead.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

<sup>6</sup> “Betty White,” IMDb (IMDb.com), accessed March 17, 2022, [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0924508/bio?ref=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0924508/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm).

<sup>7</sup> Betty White, *Here We Go Again: My Life in Television* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 13.

parents and referred to them as the friends she liked best.<sup>8</sup> Betty's well-documented love of animals came from Horace and Tess. As avid campers, the family would often return home with a new pet, and, in an unconventional turn, when most children would try to convince their parents to keep an animal, Horace and Tess would convince Betty.<sup>9</sup> Betty hoped to turn her love of the outdoors and animals into a career as a forest ranger, but in the 1930s, women could not become rangers due to discriminatory hiring practices rooted in gender-based discrimination.<sup>10</sup> While she was a Horace Mann Grammar School student, her aspirations shifted to writing. However, the performing bug bit her around 1935 after she wrote herself into the lead role in the school's graduation play.<sup>11</sup> Betty hoped to continue performing as an opera singer but, self-admittedly, her voice did not cooperate, although she did get to sing at her graduation ceremony from Beverly Hills High School in 1939. Her high school graduation performance proved to be fortuitous as an early television investor was in the audience and invited Betty and her classmate Harry Bennett (n.d.) to participate in a signal test.<sup>12</sup> The duo performed a version of *The Merry Widow* on the sixth floor of the Packard Automobile Building in Los Angeles broadcasting to a small screen located on the ground floor.<sup>13</sup>

Betty's dreams of following the new medium were interrupted by the United States' entry into World War II (1939–1945) in 1941. Betty joined the American Women's Voluntary

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<sup>8</sup> White, 13.

<sup>9</sup> White, 13.

<sup>10</sup> California's first official female State park ranger, Paula Peterson, was hired in 1972. "Inside the Actors Studio (S16 E6) - Betty White," YouTube, December 31, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GP\\_nYq\\_UR0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GP_nYq_UR0).

<sup>11</sup> White, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Ettenhofer, "How Betty White Got Her Start in One of the First TV Broadcasts Ever," SlashFilm.com, January 1, 2022, <https://www.slashfilm.com/722253/how-betty-white-got-her-start-in-one-of-the-first-tv-broadcasts-ever/>.

<sup>13</sup> White, 14.

Services (AWVS) who delivered supplies to gun encampments located in the hills above Hollywood and Santa Monica. She also spent time in the local recreation halls with nearby service members.<sup>14</sup> In 1945, she met and married a pilot, Dick Barker (b. 1914), and the two moved to his chicken farm in Ohio. Betty soon discovered that it was not the life she wanted; within six months the marriage was over, and she returned to Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup> Upon her return, Betty joined the Bliss-Hayden Little Theater in Beverly Hills where she landed lead roles in *Spring Dance* and *Dear Ruth*.<sup>16</sup>

Her time at the theater enhanced her acting skills and led to her second marriage. Albert Wooten (1914–1995), known professionally as Lane Allan, an actor and an agent from National Concert Artists Corporation (NCAC), was in the audience on the closing night of *Dear Ruth* and, following Betty's performance, Allan asked her for a date. During their courtship, Allan guided Betty toward radio which led to an audition for the radio comedy, *The Great Gildersleeve*.<sup>17</sup> It was an excellent opportunity for Betty, but it also presented a "real catch-22" because the union representing radio performers, the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA), required anyone working in radio to be a union member. However, to apply for membership, a performer needed to be working in radio. While leaving the audition, she ran into the show's producer, Fran Van Hartesveldt (1912–1970), in an elevator. After speaking on the ride, Van Hartesveldt agreed to let Betty say one word, "Parkay" (the margarine company that sponsored the show), during the show's commercial breaks thus qualifying her for AFRA membership.<sup>18</sup> Betty's role on *The Great*

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<sup>14</sup> White, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Gliatto, "Forever Betty," PEOPLE.com, December 6, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140201174853/http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20129972,00.html>.

<sup>16</sup> White, 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> White, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Fran Van Hartesveldt later became a writer on Betty White's show *Date with the Angels*. White, 21-23.

*Gildersleeve* led to roles in other commercials, including a commercial for American Airlines (1946–1947).<sup>19</sup>

Betty's relationship with Allan progressed to the point where she sensed he might propose. Worried about the prospect of a second failed marriage, Betty decided to break up with Allan.<sup>20</sup> She used an "out of the blue" movie offer from Ansco Film to end the relationship because the role required a six-week shoot in the Sierra Nevada mountain range. As it turned out, her part was relatively small and because of the remote location, Betty was called upon to be the animal wrangler and script girl, in addition to her acting duties. The extra responsibilities that would help her later in her career did little to keep her mind off Allan, and, after her return to Los Angeles in 1947, they reconciled and married.<sup>21</sup>

By 1949, Betty's radio career was flourishing. At the same time, television evolved from an experiment to a commercial endeavor and Los Angeles stations needed on-air talent. The burgeoning stations recruited well-known local radio personalities to the new medium, including Al Jarvis (1909–1970).<sup>22</sup> Lacking an established format for television, Jarvis created *Hollywood on Television* as a visual edition of his radio broadcast for KLAC, and he wanted a co-host. Betty's stage, radio, and movie experience, as well as her eagerness to work, led to a phone call from Jarvis offering her the co-hosting duties on *Hollywood on Television*.<sup>23</sup> They played records from an on-set turntable and chatted between songs. Since programming content for television stations was limited, *Hollywood on Television* aired live for five hours a day, six days a week, without a script or writers.<sup>24</sup> *Hollywood on Television* became a popular show, and as Betty's professional life improved, her home life declined. Despite his early support for

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<sup>19</sup> White, 23.

<sup>20</sup> White, 24.

<sup>21</sup> White, 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> White, 34.

<sup>23</sup> White, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Without writers, Betty White and Al Jarvis spent the entire show "ad-libbing" their live on-air conversations. White, 32-38.

Betty's career, Allan ultimately admitted to wanting a more "traditional" marriage, and in 1949 the union ended in divorce.<sup>25</sup>

During World War II many women took jobs formerly held by men who were off fighting in Europe or the Pacific. Employers appealed to women's patriotism and encouraged their participation in the workforce, but only until the war's end. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the women who took wartime jobs returned to their "traditional" roles as wives and mothers. Gender expectations were reinforced in books, films, and television where women were portrayed as "stay-at-home moms" in charge of the household and child rearing, while their "masculine" husband worked outside the home.<sup>26</sup> The post-war economy afforded many households the freedom to live comfortably on one income and the concurrent "baby boom" further entrenched a woman's role.<sup>27</sup> However, Betty demonstrated an unwillingness to accommodate societal norms, especially if it meant abandoning her career. In 1951, Al Jarvis decided to leave *Hollywood on Television*; he was replaced by the actor Eddie Albert (1906–2005), who left after six months to film *Roman Holiday* (1953).<sup>28</sup> In 1952, Betty became the sole presenter of *Hollywood on Television*, making her the first woman to host a television talk show.<sup>29</sup> During the show, Betty introduced sketches entitled "Life with Elizabeth." Their popularity prompted KLAC to spin them into their own show, also titled *Life with Elizabeth*, a move that made Betty the first woman to star in a situation comedy (sitcom). Betty agreed to the spin-off, and she, along with her creative partner George Tibbles (1913–1987), formed a production

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<sup>25</sup> Gliatto, "Forever Betty."

<sup>26</sup> "Women and Work After World War II," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed May

26, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tupperware-work/>.

<sup>27</sup> "Women and Work."

<sup>28</sup> White, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Toni Fitzgerald, "Betty White's Early Years: How She Became One of TV's First Superstars," *Forbes*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonifitzgerald/2021/12/31/betty-whites-early-years-how-she-became-one-of-tvs-first-superstars/?sh=12d9a6041826>.

company, Bandy Productions, to oversee the project.<sup>30</sup> The business arrangement made Betty one of the few women—and among the first—to produce a television show.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to producing and starring in the weekly live broadcast of *Life with Elizabeth*, Betty continued hosting *Hollywood on Television*. However, *Life with Elizabeth* began receiving attention beyond the Los Angeles broadcast market. In 1953, Bandy Productions entered a creative agreement with Don Fedderson (1913–1994) to pre-record the show for nationally syndicated distribution.<sup>32</sup> The show's success enabled Bandy Productions and Fedderson to pitch *Hollywood on Television* as a national show. Then, in 1954, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) agreed and rebranded the program as *The Betty White Show*.<sup>33</sup> In addition to hosting and producing the eponymous show (which made Betty the first woman to produce a national television show), Betty was given complete creative control—a responsibility very few women in 1950s television held. As a child of the Great Depression (1929–1939), the work ethic and tenacity that Betty displayed getting into show business served her well as she transitioned from on-air talent to showrunner.

Very few women worked in television in the 1950s and, considering that only thirty percent of the overall workforce was female, Betty's achievement was even more remarkable.<sup>34</sup> Having complete control of the show allowed Betty to hire Betty Turbiville (n.d.), one of television's first female directors.<sup>35</sup> Betty also hired an African American tap dancer, Arthur Duncan (b. 1933), as a

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<sup>30</sup> White, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Lucille Ball also partnered in a production company with her husband, Desi Arnaz. Fitzgerald, "Betty White's Early Years."

<sup>32</sup> White, 72–83.

<sup>33</sup> White, 87–89.

<sup>34</sup> Mitra Toossi, "Monthly Labor Review," 2002, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2002/05/art2full.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Keveney, "Betty White: PBS Salutes Happy Homemaker, Golden Girl, TV Pioneer," USA Today, August 22, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/08/20/betty-white-gets-pbs-tribute-first-lady-television/1026883002/>.



series regular. In the mid-1950s, much of the United States observed segregation laws and was characterized by overt anti-blackness, so Duncan's appearances on *Hollywood on Television*—which made him the first African American series regular on a talk show—were not universally welcomed. NBC received complaints about the interracial interactions on the show; most came from viewers in the segregated South. In a 2018 interview, Duncan recalled, "I was on the show, and they had some letters out of Mississippi and elsewhere that some of the stations would not carry the show if I was permitted to stay on there."<sup>36</sup> Betty responded by using Duncan whenever possible and said, "I'm sorry but he stays...Live with it!"<sup>37</sup> At the time of the controversy, Duncan was unaware of Betty's position; when learning about it years later, he responded by saying, "She just stood up for her beliefs. That solved everything at the time."<sup>38</sup> In her second autobiography released in 2010, *Here We Go Again*, Betty stated that she was "livid—[it] was 1954, for heaven's sake!"<sup>39</sup> Fearing a boycott in the South, sponsors distanced themselves from the show but, according to Betty, NBC chose to defend the show and Duncan remained.<sup>40</sup> Betty welcomed other African American performers on her show, notably the rhythm and blues group The Four Jokers.<sup>41</sup>

*The Betty White Show*, which aired weekdays at noon, was a rating success but the variety show that followed at 3 p.m., *The Kate Smith Hour*, could not match the rating numbers. NBC decided to move *The Betty White Show* to 4:30 p.m. to boost Kate Smith's (1907–1986) ratings, but viewers did not follow the time

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<sup>36</sup> Tai Saint-Louis, "Betty White Made History with Arthur Duncan, He Did It Twice More," Black Enterprise, January 2, 2022, <https://www.blackenterprise.com/betty-whites-controversial-hire-of-tap-dancer-arthur-duncan-made-history-in-more-ways-than-one/>.

<sup>37</sup> Saint-Louis, "Betty White Made History."

<sup>38</sup> Keveney, "Betty White: PBS."

<sup>39</sup> White, 94.

<sup>40</sup> White, 94.

<sup>41</sup> "The Betty White Show," IMDb (IMDb.com), accessed April 29, 2022, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0211781/fullcredits/?ref=tt\\_cl\\_sm](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0211781/fullcredits/?ref=tt_cl_sm).

change. The loss of viewership prompted NBC to move *The Betty White Show* to 12:30 p.m., and once again, viewers did not follow. Citing the rating decline, NBC canceled *The Betty White Show* on December 31, 1954, after only one year on the air.<sup>42</sup>

During the early 1960s, Betty met her third husband, actor and game show host Allen Ludden (1917–1981).<sup>43</sup> Ludden hosted the game show, *Password*, and Betty was a frequent guest contestant; they also worked together in a summer stock play in Cape Cod.<sup>44</sup> In 1963, Betty married Ludden and spent most of the decade as a game show guest, hostess of NBC's annual Rose Parade coverage, and stepmother to Ludden's children.<sup>45</sup>

In 1973, she was approached by Allan Burns (1935–2021), a co-creator of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970), to audition for the role of Sue Ann Nivens. Described as a “cloyingly sweet...dragon...with a tinge of nymphomania,” Sue Ann would serve as a frequent foil to Mary Tyler Moore's main character.<sup>46</sup> In a 1987 interview with Terry Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air*, Betty said that the writers came up with an idea for a “yucky, icky, sweet Betty White-type.”<sup>47</sup> Although not necessarily cultivated as such, Betty's television persona was noted for being wholesome, “bland [and] sweet.”<sup>48</sup> Betty relished the idea of playing against type: “I don't think anybody who knew me could've missed the fact that I had a sense of humor about that because I never was being the sweet type. I had—I've always had a rather bawdy sense of

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<sup>42</sup> White, 98-99.

<sup>43</sup> White, 137-52.

<sup>44</sup> Pioneers of Television, “Betty White - the Complete Pioneers of Television Interview,” YouTube, January 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPyddnF8jgQ>.

<sup>45</sup> White, 149-54.

<sup>46</sup> White, 192.

<sup>47</sup> David Bianculli and Terry Gross, “‘Fresh Air’ Celebrates Legendary TV Actor Betty White,” NPR, January 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/07/1071242706/fresh-air-celebrates-legendary-tv-actor-betty-white>.

<sup>48</sup> Bianculli and Gross, “‘Fresh Air’ Celebrates.”

humor.”<sup>49</sup> Betty was also excited about the “one-shot” nature of her appearance.<sup>50</sup> However, the performance was so well received that Betty’s character was immediately elevated to recurring status.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, television roles mirrored the traditional American family with the father as the breadwinner and the mother as a homemaker.<sup>51</sup> It was not until the 1970s, as more women entered the workforce, that television roles reflected the changes in gender roles by focusing on working women.<sup>52</sup> Television sitcoms, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, showed women living independently while pursuing a career. Other comedies centered around divorced, single mothers finding a place in society, while female oriented action shows (*Bionic Woman*, *Wonder Woman*, or *Charlie’s Angels*) challenged gender expectations.<sup>53</sup> Women’s characters were strong, assertive, and free-thinking and even though the depiction of women changed, the “cutting, sexually voracious schemer” of Sue Ann Nivens was virtually unheard of in the early 1970s.<sup>54</sup> Betty remained with the show until its end in 1977, and the role earned her two Emmy Awards for Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.<sup>55</sup>

For over seventy years, Betty remained a constant on television. She helped create and define the medium, blazing a trail for all who followed. Her work ethic made her an unignorable force, from hosting *Hollywood on Television* six days a week to producing and starring in *Life with Elizabeth* each Saturday night.

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<sup>49</sup> Bianculli and Gross, “‘Fresh Air’ Celebrates.”

<sup>50</sup> Bianculli and Gross, “‘Fresh Air’ Celebrates.”

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth L. Maurer, “Tuning in to Women in Television,” National Women’s History Museum, September 21, 2016, <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/tuning-women-television#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20women%E2%80%99s%20roles%20in%20development%20of%20empowered%20women%20characters.>

<sup>52</sup> Maurer, “Tuning in to Women.”

<sup>53</sup> Morganne Mallon, “Women in Television: 1970s,” Morgannes Civic Issues Blog, 2014, <https://sites.psu.edu/civicissuesmallon/2014/03/06/women-in-television-1970s/>.

<sup>54</sup> Keveney, “Betty White: PBS.”

<sup>55</sup> White, 199-201.

By exercising complete creative control over *The Betty White Show*, Betty championed feminism and racial equality, whether knowingly or not. By creating the character of Sue Ann Nivens on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Betty showed her ability to adapt to a changing society and television landscape. Betty's genuineness came through in her work, regardless of the character or show, and garnered a loyal fan base. Betty White's accomplishments in front of and behind the camera led to her 1995 Television Academy Hall of Fame induction and deserved the title of First Lady of Television, or more accurately, Ms. Television.

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George “Matt” Patino is a first-year graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino where he is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in History. Matt earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of Redlands after transferring from Crafton Hills College. His area of research focuses on twentieth-century United States history with a particular interest in the changing political and social landscape following World War II. Upon graduation, he plans to teach at the community college level while writing and publishing in the popular history genre. Matt has worked as a writing tutor at Crafton Hills College and the University of Redlands, a Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leader at California State University, San Bernardino and in the Heritage Room of the A.K. Smiley Public Library in Redlands. Matt would like to thank his editor, Jacquelyne Anton, and Dr. Jeremy Murray for their support, guidance, and encouragement during the writing and editing process.





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