



Necessity is the “Mother of Invention:” Bette Graham and the Invention of “White-Out”

by **Scott Sosebee**

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(Sep 19 2022) The other day in class I tried to explain to my students how difficult it was to have to type your papers back before the invention of word processing. They had a vague notion of typewriters, but when I made the comment that “I was such a poor typist that I probably helped make ‘Liquid Paper’ a fortune,” I could tell from the looks on these young people’s faces that they had no idea what I was talking about. So, I explained what the product was and that it was invented by a Texas secretary who was also the mother of a fairly famous entertainer—another person, it seems, of which they had never heard. So, in that spirit, let’s look at the story of Bette McMurray Graham, the inventor of “Liquid Paper.”

Bette McMurray was born in San Antonio in 1924. Her mother was an independent artist and her father worked variously as a banker and for an accounting firm, both in San Antonio and then in Dallas, where the family moved when Bette was twelve. Shortly after graduating high school at age sixteen, she married a man named Warren Nesmith and the couple moved to Houston where Warren got a job in a refinery. Warren Nesmith’s employment record was spotty and there are some indications that he had some problems with alcohol, which led Bette to take various secretarial positions during times when her husband was out of work. The couple had one son, Michael, born in 1942. If you recognize the name Michael Nesmith you may be showing your age a bit; Bette and Warren’s son would go on to be a founding member of the pop/rock group “The Monkees,” as well as a songwriter and as a pioneer in the “country-rock” genre.

The Nesmith’s marriage was troubled and doomed to fail, and the two divorced in 1946. Destitute and with a son to raise, Bette Nesmith moved back to Dallas to be close to her family. She took a series of mostly temporary clerical jobs while also trying to make it as a freelance artist; she had inherited a love for and a talent for painting and free-hand drawing from her mother, an aptitude she would return to later in her life.

Bette eventually gained the appreciation of the President of Texas Bank and Trust after temporarily filling in for his secretary during her sick leave. When the President's secretary decided not to return to the position, he hired Bette to be his executive secretary in 1951. It would be in this position that she would transfer her talent as an artist to invent a product that would forever change all of us who ever had to labor over typed documents.

Anyone who has ever had to use a typewriter knows that making a mistake could ruin your entire day. One typo, one missed key, one little inverted word might mean you had to start that page all over again. Bette Nesmith's position meant she spent much of her day typing, and mistakes during such a task often kept her from her other duties. She needed something that would help her "cover up" her mistakes, so she grabbed a tube of tempura paint from her artist's kit and began to roll the paper up and "paint" over her mistakes. Pure tempura paint proved too thick to completely type over and it took too long to dry, so Bette began to mix her paint with a little water, some oil, and placing it in a small bottle with the smallest paintbrush she could find next to it. She called her mixture "Mistake Out," and she began to share it with other secretaries at the bank.

Her little invention may have remained an "inside" phenomenon if she had not met three men—an office-supply dealer who regularly called on Texas Bank as part of his assigned route, a local chemistry teacher that she met at church, and his friend who worked at a Dallas paint-manufacturing company. They encouraged Bette to work on her "Mistake Out" and helped her mix chemicals and materials in her kitchen using an oil funnel and a hand mixer. She hit on a formula that did not become thick, was easily painted onto typing paper, and dried quickly, which was the key to allowing the typist to "correct" his/her mistakes. She named her product "Liquid Paper," and at first she and her son, along with neighbors and friends, filled bottles from her home and sold them to local secretaries and businesses. The company, however, made no profits, so she kept her job at the Bank. Her fortune changed when a reporter from a business trade magazine mentioned the product in a 1958 article. That story led General Electric to order 400 bottles, and in the next year more than 500 other companies placed orders. She left Texas Bank and began to devote her full-time attention to her product.

Liquid Paper continued to grow and finally turned its first profit in 1960, and in 1968 sold one million bottles for the first time and finally built its own plant. Bette had remarried to Robert Graham in 1962 and he began to co-manage the business with Bette. Working together, however, caused their relationship to deteriorate and the Graham's divorced in 1975 after a long battle over conditions. Bette, exhausted from her protracted divorce, resigned from the company she had created and Robert Graham took over as sole CEO. His first action was to have the Board of Directors change the original formula, which in turn eliminated

Bette's royalties. She sued, and after another long legal fight, she received those back in 1979, the same year Liquid Paper was sold to the Gillette Corporation for \$48 million.

Bette used much of her settlement with the company and her share of the sale to establish the Bette Clair McMurray Foundation in 1976 and the Gihon Foundation in 1978. Both groups directed support for women's welfare—especially single mothers—and awarded scholarships and grants to help women in business and in the arts. Bette once told an interviewer that she was a “feminist who wants freedom for myself and everyone else.” Unfortunately, Bette did not live long to see the fruits of her philanthropy as she died just a few months after the sale of Liquid Paper at the age of 56 in 1980. She left behind a legacy of entrepreneurship and the gratitude of countless heavy-handed typists such as me. If I had typed this article on a typewriter, I very well may have used a whole bottle of Liquid Paper!

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