

## Bess Whitehead Scott Scholarship Fund



About Bess

# Bess Whitehead Scott, 1890–1997

*Write! Just don't waste time. Don't read too many articles about writing. No matter whether you do it well or not – WRITE. Give some time every day of the world, if it's not but 30 minutes, to use your mind for whatever you're working on. ALWAYS be working on something.*

— Bess Scott

**B**ess W. Scott, pioneering Texas woman journalist, was born on December 13, 1890, in Brown County near Blanket, Texas. She was the youngest of nine children of Sarah Caroline “Carrie” (Barnett) Whitehead, who was born on a large Georgia cotton plantation, and William Tazewell “Taz” Whitehead, who was born on a Virginia tobacco plantation. Her father fought for the South in the Civil War and took part in the battle of Gettysburg. At age 18 he was taken captive by Northern troops and forced to sign an oath of allegiance to the Union. He signed but immediately rejoined Confederate troops.

The couple moved to Texas to farm in 1877. When Bess was 2 years old, her father died of pneumonia. With hard work and thrift, her mother kept the family fed and the farm running during a subsequent drought.

As a child, Bess pretended to read newspapers, magazines and the

family's few books until her older sister Elizabeth taught her to actually read at age 5. This sparked in young Bess a lifelong love of the written word. A lingering childhood infection in the aftermath of measles left her partially deaf, a condition that became worse in her adult years and provided a challenge during her journalism career, when she would often follow up after press conferences with private interviews to compensate.

Bess Whitehead spent three years at Baylor Female College in Belton (now the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor) and a final year in Waco at Baylor University, where she graduated in 1912. She worked for room and board, and her brother sold two mules to fund her tuition. She took creative writing classes from acclaimed Texas writer Dorothy Scarborough and her work appeared in the campus magazine, *Baylor Literary*.

After graduation, Bess taught high school English and Latin in Houston



for two years and for one year at Howard Payne College in Brownwood. In 1915 she returned to Houston and, with no background in journalism, talked her way into a job at the *Houston Post* as the first woman news reporter in Houston by convincing an editor that male reporters would soon be called to service during World War I. Until that time, most Texas newspapers hired women only for society and club reporting. Her starting salary was \$6 a week.

She spent 25 years with Houston newspapers, but also periodically held jobs in public relations, advertising and teaching. In 1917 she was in Hollywood writing stories for two-reel silent movies. That same year she met

Hubert Clark Scott, a U.S. Marine still recovering from a gunshot wound from a sniper during an uprising in the Dominican Republic. They married the next year, and she followed him in his job as a traveling salesman. By the early 1920s, they had two children, Lila Bess and Hubert Jr., called Scotty.

Her husband's problems with alcohol abuse eventually led to divorce and her return to newspaper reporting, this time for the *Houston Press*. For the *Press*, she wrote about film and theater and befriended a young Clark Gable after he balked at her review of his acting in a local play. She later returned to the *Houston Post* as amusements editor.

During the next 15 years, Scott did a wide range of reporting, including team coverage of major news events. She interviewed Eleanor Roosevelt twice and became friends with future president Lyndon Johnson when the then 22-year-old Sam Houston High School teacher sought publicity for school debate and

speech teams. She covered the 1928 Democratic Convention in Houston, and was often called on to do news research for other reporters. During the Great Depression, her newspaper pay was cut from \$37.50 a week to \$27.50, so she moonlighted teaching journalism and creative writing in night school and later at Milby High School. During World War II, she wrote a series of columns about women doing jobs traditionally filled by men.

Scott authored two textbooks on journalism as well as an informal history, *The Way it Was*, about the Whitehead family. She helped establish a publication of the Texas Federation of Business and Professional Women—*Texas Woman*—and served as editor. She moved to Austin in 1977 and, except for two years in Colorado, lived there for the remainder of her life. Her memoir, *You Meet Such Interesting People*, was published by Texas A&M University Press in 1989. On her 100th birthday, the Writers' League of Texas established a scholarship in her name for students studying journalism at

select Texas universities; a second scholarship for older writers (age 40 or older) was established by the Writers' League in 2000. In 1992 Baylor University named her a Distinguished Alumna (80 years after her graduation), and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor honored her as an Outstanding Alumna. She was inducted into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame in 1994 and was selected by the Women's Chamber of Commerce of Texas as one of 100 most influential "Texas Women of the Century" in 1999.

Her last years were spent in an assisted living facility in Austin where she taught writing to senior citizens. A final byline appeared in *Texas Highways* magazine in 1994. Bess Scott died December 27, 1997, at age 107. A memorial service was held at Blanket's First Baptist Church and burial at Rock Church Cemetery. She left a legacy of excellence and diligence that is a model for today's students in the fields of journalism and writing.

