



## Mysteries and Mules

At age 77, after a life of accomplishments in several different fields, Betty Orlemann is now writing her fifth mystery

by Joanna Wilson

**G**ood fortune comes to most of us in dribs and drabs, but for others, it seems to happen over and over as though planned. And that holds true for Betty Orlemann, 77, of Tinicum, who continually reinvents herself through a multitude of activities—not the least of which is published author.

Betty is a vibrant woman with an ongoing interest in life. “Given the chance to dig deep regarding a particular interest, I just do it. I seem to fall into things...”

She grew up in East Orange, New Jersey, one of three siblings (a sister died at three months of age). Her father, from Northern Ireland, was “into linen,” and her mother an editor at Philadelphia’s Winston Publishing Company. “I grew up in a house filled with books,” she says, “so I took an early interest in reading and writing.”

Early is the operative word here. Even in grammar school, she wanted to be a reporter, and she put together a neighborhood newspaper. “But I wrote little stories too.”

While living in New Jersey, Betty, her brother and their parents



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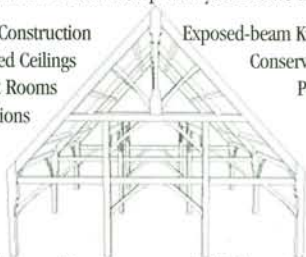
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frequently visited her grandparents in Wyncote, Montgomery County. When her grandparents died, Betty's mother kept the Wyncote home. Her father became ill and died when Betty was 16 and the family moved there.

Still aspiring to become a reporter, she also thought she wanted to be a singer and majored in music at Sullins College in Bristol, Virginia, and later at Beaver College. She did sing in church choirs, and until 2004, in the Palisades Community Chorus. Eventually, she decided against a singing career. "English was my love."

Acting on the premise that, "when something presents itself, I'll go for it..." She was in her late teens when she appeared with the Wyncote Players, staying with them for 15 years. At 21, she got into ballroom dancing and, after college, she and two friends became dance instructors themselves.

"I think everything you do places you on another path," she says. "Being involved with life is one learning experience after another." Another path opened up when a friend who headed the EKG Department at Abington Hospital in Montgomery County left because of family responsibilities, and she asked Betty to come in and discuss the job. "If I liked it enough to try it, they would train me."

Well, Betty liked it. Beginning in 1950, she managed the EKG Department and also learned to perform routine lab work and x-rays. Then she fell into something else. One day, the chief cardiologist said, "Betty, I sure wish you could type and take shorthand. Then I could dictate the patient's file material for their charts." Thinking to increase her value and also her paycheck, Betty enrolled in the Jenkintown Business School for shorthand and typing.

In autumn of 1952, Betty and a friend appeared in *Stage Door*. Her friend's boyfriend came to see the play and brought along his friend, Bob Orlemann. He and Betty "hit it off immediately" and, marrying in 1953, they had four children.

Now, Betty loves antiques. She'd often pass by the Copper Lantern Antique Shop on Glenside's Keswick Avenue. When the shop coincidentally went up for sale, she and a childhood friend went into partnership and kept it going for 11 years. "It was 1966," she says. "Joan, my youngest, had just started kindergarten. Doris and I bought antiques and took buying trips to New York City. It was great fun." In 1969, the two families went antique hunting to England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Then surprise! Surprise! Another opportunity arose although the circumstances were tragic. Betty and her partner belonged to the Greater Glenside Chamber of Commerce. Betty was elected

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incoming vice-president; the man slated to be president died in a plane crash. "I moved up, and in 1975, served as the Chamber's first woman president."

Betty had done freelance writing before her marriage but, after 1966, it played a more dominant role. "I wrote freelance people stories," she says. Montgomery County Newspapers such as *The Times Chronicle* and the *Glenside News* used her work regularly, later joined by *The Morning Call* (Quakertown Bureau), *The Trentonian* and *The Intelligencer*. She now writes for *Bucks County Herald* and *Delaware*

*Valley News*, the latter running her regular column.

This column was another lucky happenstance. "The woman who wrote the column became ill and the editor advertised for a replacement. I submitted two sample columns and he liked them. That was 20 years ago. I've been writing this biweekly column ever since."

Betty joined the staff of the *Bucks County Courier Times* in 1980, the result of...you guessed it! "The man who covered criminal courts needed a helper and he asked me if I was interested. "Well," she says, with a conspiratorial smile, "you don't say no, do you?"

Betty covered the criminal courts for seven years. "When a sheriff's deputy took an arsonist to a mental institution in Boston, I flew along to cover the event. Another time, I rode to Bristol Township on a drug raid along with two cars of deputies."

Moving to Bucks, Betty and her husband chose a farmhouse on River Road that backed up to the Delaware Canal. Yep! Another it-just-so-happened incident—one that began Betty's continuing love affair with the Canal.

To back up for a minute, in 1932, the Delaware Valley Protection Association began to protect much of the Delaware Valley, including the Delaware Canal. The Canal provided a 60-mile stretch of water from Easton to Bristol for boats carrying coal and other commodities to market in Philadelphia and New York.

In 1982, Betty became concerned about flood damage and poor tow-path conditions. She rounded up others with a similar interest and they painted bridges and waste gates and repaired walls. Thus, she founded the Friends of the Delaware Canal—still in operation today. "We were small at first—maybe twenty-five or thirty members. Now we have over one thousand."

She is also one of 30 commissioners on the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor and State Heritage Corridor Com-

mission. The Heritage Corridor includes the Lehigh and the Delaware Canals. The commissioners represent different areas along the corridor.

Though Betty has had an enormously productive life, she has also been touched by tragedy. Her third child (and first daughter) died as a baby. Her husband, after a spinal chord injury playing college football, suffered from restricted movement as he grew older. Told by a physical therapist while they lived in the River Road house that "should a fire occur, Bob wouldn't get out alive," they added a large suite to the sizable two-story home of their daughter, son-in-law and their family on three-and-one-half acres in Tinicum.

They moved there in 1997, but Bob grew worse and was confined to bed. Betty tended to him in both homes for over 10 years until he passed away in 2001. It was during this time, while her husband napped or watched television or read, that she sat down to write the first in a series of mystery novels. She has finished four and is working on her fifth.

Her protagonist—Hattie Farwell—"happened to appear." Now where have we heard that before? Hattie is a spry, inquisitive 80-year-old who wears a white blouse, long black skirt, black shoes and gray hair pulled back in a bun. Readers attending Betty's book signings see Hattie in person. Well, almost. Her namesake—a stuffed cotton doll wearing Hattie's clothes and measuring 26 inches high—sits on the counter. At home, Hattie sits on a chair next to the fireplace, waiting for her next case.

Betty chose a senior for her continuing major character because "many of today's older people are strong and stand up for what they believe." She doesn't plot her books from an outline. "They advise that in college courses so you know where you're going. But I don't want to know. Once I get into it, I can't wait to see what happens. I figure it's going to take itself somewhere and I don't want to interfere."

Betty's books are set in Bucks County. Titles are *Who Killed Annie?*, *Stranger in the Woods*, *Terror in the Shadows* and *Murder on the Canal*. In progress is *Death Stalks the Wedding*. They are available at The Book Garden on Bridge Street, French-town, The Book Shop on Main Street, Doylestown and Canterbury Tales in Peddler's Village. They are also available on Amazon.com and at Borders.

Now, if you think this completes Betty's laundry list of accomplishments, guess again. You know those colorful mules you see throughout Bucks? Betty's idea. She visited her son and his family in Cincinnati in 2000 and saw huge fiberglass pigs in various locations. The campaign was called "The Big Pig Gig" and was very successful, inspired by the fiberglass cows in Chicago.

Returning home, she attended the Canal Commission Meeting in Easton and heard them talking about raising money and increasing interest in the Canal. "I said, 'Why don't we make fiberglass mules and locate them along the corridor?' After all, they have cows in Chicago, horses in Kentucky, Mr. Potato Head in Rhode Island and pigs in Cincinnati, so why not mules in Bucks?' Mules worked in the mines, on the farms, they pulled the canal boats."

They argued the cost effectiveness, she says. But eventually, as we all know, arguments stopped. "During 2003, we placed some 150 mules from Wilkes Barre to Bristol. Many were purchased privately, others were sold at auction. They've made quite a hit, haven't they, in spite of those early arguments."

Betty lives with her dog, Cinder, and her cat, Nicky. For information about her books, call Red Anvil Press at 800-431-1579. ♦

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*Joanna Wilson lives in Southampton, PA. Besides non-fiction articles, she writes fiction and teaches courses in writing.*