Remembering a Fallen Sparrow

Paul Wilborn
REMEMBERING A FALLEN SPARROW

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(Editor’s Note: Tampa Historical Society lost a beloved member and friend, Betty Phipps, who died in January, 1988. An appropriate tribute was paid to her by fellow Tampa Tribune columnist Paul Wilborn, and is reprinted by permission).

"Paul!" The voice was friendly, slightly Southern, and carried a humorous urgency that stopped me in my tracks. "Hold still."

I did, and she worked quickly. A tie, too hastily knotted, was protruding from a crimped, wrinkled collar - basic bachelor syndrome.

But Betty Phipps and I were on our way to a luncheon, and the longtime social columnist for The Tampa Tribune wasn’t about to arrive with the young reporter from Dogpatch.

She brushed a few wrinkles from my jacket. "That’s better," she said. "Now, how do I look?"

She looked like a tiny, delicate bird; like a favorite aunt in a coffee-table photograph; like a fine-boned, Southern lady from a gracious era that my generation had all too quickly cast aside.
"WITH PLUCK AND HUMOR"

"Betty," I said, "you look fine."

Betty had been diagnosed that year - cancer, the doctors said, but operable.

"They say," said Betty, "once you’re diagnosed you probably have five years. Five years is a long time."

Betty got her five years and then some. But her illness returned, and Monday (January 26) we went to her funeral.

Betty faced death with the same pluck and humor she used to mollify and satisfy 12 ½ years of garden club members, charity ball volunteers, proud and persistent mothers and countless social butterflies who kept her desk buried in pink "While You Were Out" message slips.

She thrived on those telephone calls and the parties and luncheons and debutante balls that were as much a part of her life as her job.

GIVE ME THE GOSSIP!

When friend and former boss Leland Hawes visited her recently, Betty was bent and thin. Another friend said she looked like a fallen sparrow.

But Betty didn't mention her illness.

"Tell me all the gossip," she playfully demanded, and Hawes did his best to fill her in. As he rose to leave, she mentioned the only thing that was troubling her: "I would love," she said, "to have a Cuban sandwich."

Cuban sandwiches were just one of the things Betty loved about Tampa. Along with her social columns, she wrote numerous personal, and often nostalgic, columns about life in the city.

My favorite was one she wrote in September 1985, a few months before her retirement.

She had gone to Tampa Theatre to see the return of the "Mighty Wurlitzer" organ that she had loved during her childhood.

"I glanced at myself in the huge lobby mirrors and was shocked," she wrote. "Those mirrors said I was now a little old lady. As a child I used to stop there just to look at myself."

"Inside, all was as it should be. Stars were twinkling, the statues looked down, the peacock was there. Only I had aged."

HER FINAL COLUMN

She wrote her final "Personal View" column December 24, 1985. The topic, of course, was Christmas. But, looking back at it now, it says even more about a woman who faced countless tragedies and disappointments in her 67 years, but never lost her faith or her optimism.

"Births, deaths, marriages and divorces add and subtract family members," she wrote. "Events make for travel to distant places where cultures and traditions are varied, but inside the individual, Christmas itself does not change.

"My childhood Christmases may seem Spartan by today's standards of gift-getting, but if they were, I didn't know it. It was a family time, a neighborhood visiting time, a religious time."
"What I received most was love, and that tradition has never varied."

That was Betty - a white-gloved lady in a world that too often goes around with dirty hands.