

BIOGRAPHY OF
WILMA BLANCH BECKMAN
(1903 - 1984)

By Karl Arnold Belser

My mother, Wilma Blanche Beckman, grew up in Cullom, Illinois in a neatly kept Victorian house with a shady porch, fancy trim, four gables, a 6-sided sitting room with a 6-sided hat for a roof, and a power pole behind. I have a picture showing this house with my mother, her brother Arnie (Arnold Orville Beckman), and her mother, Lizzie (Elizabeth Jewkes), on the lawn. Arnie was about 11 and Wilma 9. Their father, George, was a traveling salesman and frequently absent.

My mother's mother died a year later at 38 in a January storm. She was afflicted with diabetes. The paper said, "Wilma, who slept in the same room with her mother, unable to arouse her mama, notified the neighbors who found the woman unconscious and nearly frozen. The sick woman had raised a window to admit fresh air sometime during the night, and when found the house was cold and the potted flowers, of which the woman was very fond, were frozen so that it is thought that she may have become unconscious

early in the night. A physician was called and everything done to restore her to consciousness, but she passed away as above noted."

My mother's childhood was difficult after her father remarried. She became introverted, excelling in school and piano. My mother refused to talk about this period in her life, saying, "These were tough times and I don't think anyone meant any harm." There were tears in her eyes and I knew that she and her stepmother did not get along.

My mother was a shy young woman, and became the protégé of Esther Siefert, my father's cousin, when she attended Illinois Wesleyan. Esther, who got my mother into the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority (Alpha Gamms), was a nutritionist, and later marriage arranger. My mother credited the Alpha Gamms for developing her into an articulate, outspoken woman. My mother received a Masters Degree at the University of Chicago, worked at several hospitals as a nutritionist, following Esther's lead, and worked on a Ph.D. degree at Cornell in vitamin research until she married my father.

My father, Karl Jacob Belser, was a 36 year old, bearded, Bohemian architecture professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), now Virginia Tech, when my parents married in 1938. I appeared on the scene in 1940,

my brother Steve in '41, and my brother Larry in '43. My father joked, "By the time I figured out where kids came from I had three."

My father's career took off with a little prodding by my mother. My father taught courses in city planning at several universities. After many years at the University of Oregon, he became the Director of Planning for Santa Clara County, now known as Silicon Valley. As a result of his work he was listed in Who's Who of America as the father of "green belt zoning" for opposing the industrialization of some of the best agricultural land in the nation.

My mother's role was social chairman for my father's office and life guide for Larry, Steve, and me. We were just expected to be high achievers, and our uncle Arnie, now the famous industrialist and philanthropist Arnold O. Beckman, was the example set before us. We loved her for her guidance and support.

My mother was almost six feet tall, and an avid seamstress, because when she was a young woman she could not buy clothes to fit her. Her favorite pastimes were sewing, gardening, and community service activities, which led her to be president of the Campbell Garden Club, The Campbell Woman's Club, the Happy Hookers Sewing Club, as

well as the PTA. I remember that my mother and I passed many pleasant hours playing Scrabble, and she usually won.

My father took a United Nations job after he retired in which he was responsible for a master plan for redistributing the population of Taiwan. During the two years that my parents spent abroad, my mother became interested in the Chinese culture, decorated her home with Asian furniture and art, took up brush painting, and even sponsored a young fellow in my father's office for US citizenship.

After my father died, my mother lived the last 7 years of her life in a retirement home in the Los Gatos foothills, having a panoramic view of the Santa Clara Valley below her. The elegant living with friends her own age made her remaining years enjoyable.

I think that my mother, now Wilma Belser, was a remarkable woman of her times.

THE END