

**“W**hen I was young I really wanted to be a writer — a poet and novelist, I mean,” Ann Cottrell Free ’34 recalls. She has achieved those goals, and more. And she’s not through.

In 1938 the would-be poet, a new graduate of Barnard College, took a different sort of writing job, as a reporter for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. From then on, “going after the story” and what she off-handedly calls “flukes in life,” plus a variety of consuming interests, have shaped a remarkable career.

After an interlude in Hollywood, following her start in Richmond, the former Ann Cottrell went to Washington, where she became the first woman correspondent for *Newsweek*, the *Chicago Sun* and the *New York Herald Tribune* between 1940-1946. Covering the Washington scene from pre-Pearl Harbor until after VJ-Day, she reported on the gamut — Congress, the human and economic mobilization for war, women in uniform, foreign issues, such as the Vichy government in France, etc.

In 1946, the young journalist became a special China correspondent for the United Nation’s Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. With datelines like Shanghai, Peking, and Yangtze, she trekked across the country and documented in articles to international press syndicates the plight of the refugees there, who suffered from a famine while the corrupt Chinese government permitted diversion of relief supplies and food. She also called attention to the problems of German and Austrian Jewish refugees in China and worked for their resettlement.

Free (then Cottrell) evacuated China on the last plane out of Manchuria when peace talks collapsed between General George C. Marshall and the Communists and the Kuomintang government. Was she frightened? “That was a tight squeak,” Free admits. But she shrugs off the word “fear”: “When you’re young, you think you can do anything. You just get caught up in the moment.”

Then followed nearly a year spent as a roving correspondent through 14 countries. Traveling with another woman, Free saw

# Adventurer, Writer, Philosopher, Whistle Blower



firsthand the instability of French Indo-China (Vietnam and Cambodia) and witnessed the transfer of power in India from British Viceroy Lord Mountbatten to Prime Minister Nehru. She traveled to Egypt and lived among Yugoslavian war refugees; a journey to Geneva resulted in an interview with Eleanor Roosevelt during the framing of the Human Rights Declaration.

While Free's journalistic career has been a world-wide adventure (she has covered the administration of 10 U.S. presidents), her interests have always gone beyond national and international politics. "I've always been a liberal at heart. Social inequities, like black people being in the back of the bus when I was a child, always bothered me." Particular emphasis in her writings has always been placed on issues of human rights, civil rights, women's issues, and since 1950, on environmental issues, especially animal rights.

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"You know, a journalist cannot express his personal opinions in a news story," Free pointed out in a recent interview. But a responsible journalist who sees malfeasance or dishonesty or cruelty can carefully research and divulge the facts.

Free has written on inhumane animal slaughter techniques, and methods have been altered through the Humane Slaughter Law passed by Congress in 1960. More changes need to be made, Free thinks, but "the farm lobby is powerful. It's a David and Goliath situation [for animal rights proponents]." Observers have credited Free's exposure of laboratory animal conditions in the U.S. Department of Agriculture as the impetus to the first Congressional hearings on the matter. In 1963 the Animal Welfare Institute presented Free with its Albert Schweitzer Medal for her animal welfare writings and public disclosures.

Free is also well-known for her exhaustive writing on issues of endangered species and environmental pollution, particularly pesticides. In 1987 she received the Rachel Carson Legacy Award from the Rachel Carson Council for having initiated the suggestion that a U.S. wildlife refuge be named in Carson's memory (it now exists on the Maine coast) and for other writings on the famous environmentalist and on pesticide pollution.

In the midst of all of her travels and her journalistic career, Free has found the time for the creative, reflective writing she aspired to as a schoolgirl. A children's novel, *Forever the Wild Mare*, published in 1963, received awards from the Boy Scouts and from Boys Clubs.

*Animals, Nature, and Albert Schweitzer* is a small collection of the great doctor and theologian's writings about animals, edited by Free, with her commentary interspersed. Schweitzer stated his philosophy as "Reverence for Life." That is, all creatures must balance their own wills to live against the wills of others around them.

*No Room, Save in the Heart: Reverence for Life—Animals, Nature and Humankind* is a collection of poetry and prose written over many years. She is now in the process of writing another book, to be called *The Divided Heart*, about the kindness and cruelty in human nature.

Sitting at a cafe table at the Jefferson Sheraton after the Town School's 75th Anniversary Luncheon on October 19, Free exudes vitality as she talks about the growing awareness of ecological issues and the need for it in a world dominated by "concerns about petroleum and wheat. Think about it." Free is not only personally concerned; her career has served to awaken awareness in others too.

She and her husband, James S. Free, retired Washington correspondent to the *Birmingham News*, have a married daughter, Elissa Blake Free, who is an executive producer for Cable News Network. The elder Frees divide their time between a home in Bethesda, Maryland, and a farm in Shenandoah County, Virginia.



Mrs. Free and an old friend, Phyllis Shelton Downing '32, who lives in Front Royal, catch up at the Anniversary Luncheon.