

## Women Inventors

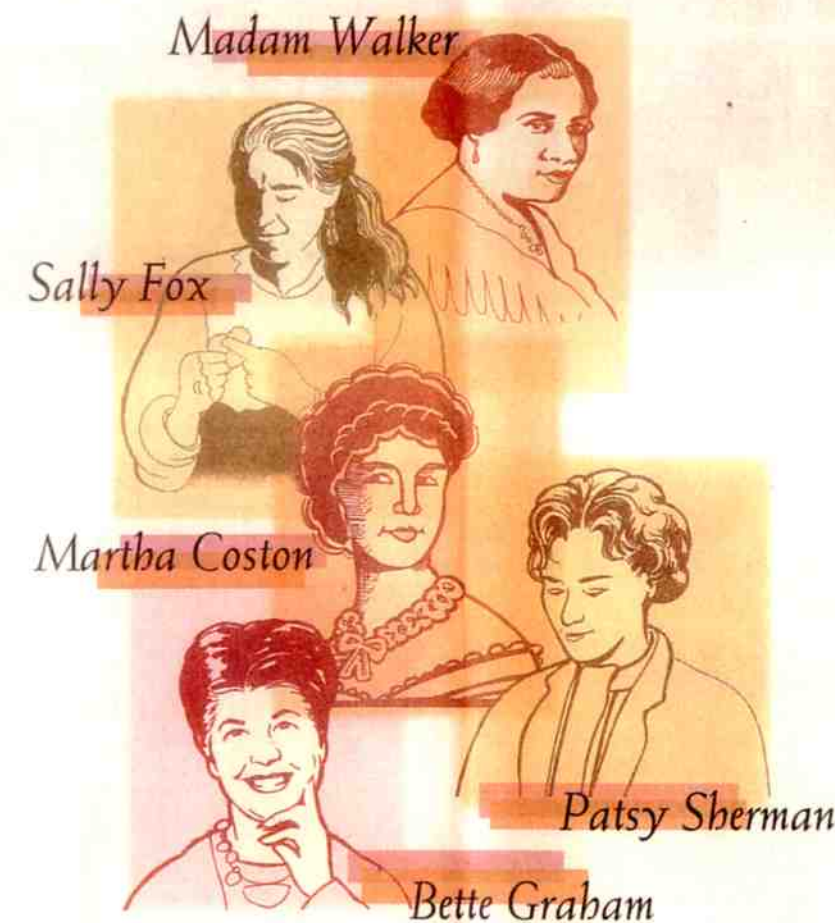
### Part 3: Bette Graham

By SUSAN CASEY

In the 1950s, secretary Bette Nesmith Graham was fed up with the new electric typewriters at the office. When she put her fingers on the keys, the machine jumped into action, typing lots of letters she didn't want. Erasing the mistakes created a big mess. But she was in her 20s, and since her divorce, she needed her job at Texas Bank and Trust in Dallas to support herself and her young son. Graham was also an artist. She worked part time painting windows at the bank.

One time she brushed paint in the wrong spot. What to do? Wash it off? Start over? Why not just paint over it, she thought. So she did. And then she got the idea: Why not just paint over mistakes at the office too? Her challenge was to create a quick-drying paint. It later became known as Liquid Paper.

After reading books at the library and talking to her son's chemistry teacher, she experimented at home. When she first took her paint to work, it was *her* secret. Then one of her bosses noticed and asked her not to put any of that "white stuff" on his letters. The other secretaries thought differently. They wanted some for themselves. While continuing at her job, she improved her paint and also began selling it to her co-workers and to office supply stores. To fill orders, she and her son, Michael (who would later become part of the musical group the Monkees), mixed up the batches of paint in their kitchen, poured it into



REUBEN MUÑOZ / Los Angeles Times

small bottles and trimmed the tiny brushes, all by hand. Since she couldn't afford a patent, she gained a trademark to protect her product.

By 1957 she was selling several hundred bottles per month. In 1962 after she married Robert Graham, a man with experience in sales, she traveled with him selling her product across the Southwest. Six years later the company broke a record with an order for 40,000 bottles in one week. In 1979 Bette Graham sold the company to the Gillette Co. for \$47.5 million. The next year, when she died, she left half her money to her son and the other half to foundations that award grants to women in business and the arts. She was aware of the difficulties people face in

starting and running a business. "I think anyone who is making progress faces fear," she once said. "Overcoming fear is all there is to success."

#### Tomorrow: Sally Fox

Kids, March is Women's History Month. This year's theme is "Women Sustaining the American Spirit." For more information, visit [www.nwhp.org/whm/themes/themes.html](http://www.nwhp.org/whm/themes/themes.html).

Susan Casey is author of "Women Invent! Two Centuries of Discoveries That Have Shaped Our World," from Chicago Review Press. This story will be on The Times' Web site at [www.latimes.com/kids](http://www.latimes.com/kids).