

# ⚓ Fraternity Project ⚓

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## Ruth Billow

### *Friend of the Sightless*

Betty Garrett Johnson, *Eta*

⚓ AT LAKE PLACID in 1936, a tall, sturdy girl took the Convention floor to explain, with sincerity and simple directness, the merits of a "Talking Book" for the blind.

Delta Gammas at that Convention listened intently, and the big room was quiet as Ruth Billow outlined the work that Delta Group originally, and later the entire Akron alumnae chapter, had done to aid the sightless.

Delta is one of four divisions in the Akron chapter. When it decided to have something of interest presented at each meeting by an individual member, Ruth Billow had been the first called upon to explain an activity in which she was interested. Thus the "Talking Book" had been introduced to the Fraternity and Delta group, and later the entire Akron chapter had adopted it as their project.

Was this humane job of making life more pleasant and worthwhile for the blind the Fraternity project that Delta Gamma alumnae had been seeking? This was the question which filtered through the room at Lake Placid as the Akron girl spoke, her expressive face and gestures lending enthusiasm to her message.

All of you now know that the answer was, "Yes"; that the delegates to that Convention voted a two-year trial of the project. And two years later, at Colorado Springs, *Eta's* Ruth Billow was there to see Aiding the Blind adopted as the Fraternity's Alumnae Project.

If you were to tell Ruth Billow that she

is the spark which generated alumnae chapters throughout the country to devote their efforts and time to this tremendous job of aiding the blind, she would be quick to correct you. Modest and unassuming, she would immediately call your attention to the work done by others.

Blind since the age of three, when searing hot coffee spilled over and splashed into her eyes and left her in a world of darkness, Ruth has been a cheerful exponent of the oft-quoted statement that a handicapped person can lead a normal, happy existence.

She is the daughter of a leading Akron mortician and lives in a lovely, large home on the west side of this Ohio center of the world's rubber industry. Her mother and two brothers complete the family circle.

Her life-story is a saga of perseverance and determination. From her childhood days, when, riding a rubber-tired tricycle and guided by the clanking metal wheels of her brother's velocipede which preceded her, she first attended private school, up to her present activities as a leader in welfare work for the blind.

Ruth's accident did not leave her timid, and she is quick to relate that she was a neighborhood tomboy. At tree climbing, she recalls, she always was able to perch herself higher than her brothers.

When she was eight, because the Akron public schools would not admit her, her parents sent her to the Ohio State School for the Blind in Columbus. She spent seven years there, learning methods of blind reading, the New York point and dot system,

and later Braille, a system standardized from the others. Other subjects as taught in the elementary schools also were in the curriculum, and geography was her favorite, a fore-runner of her love for travel.

At about this time, a period of intense self-consciousness was ended by a Buffalo specialist who urged her to get out among people more. Her mother, remembering those days when she had to force Ruth to develop a natural gregariousness, now says laughingly that she cannot keep her daughter at home. To help in the social development of the daughter, Mrs. Billow subjected her husband to a series of dancing lessons so that he could dance with Ruth.

And speaking of dancing, one of Ruth's happiest memories is of a week-end at Culver Military Academy as guest of her brothers. She danced with the students. She danced with the officers. And the muted strains of orchestra music, the swish of silk dresses, the happy laughter of young girls, and awkward young swains in the stag line formed an indelible picture on the mind of the little blind girl. She says she will never forget it.

House parties at the Billow home, with her mother as chaperone and girl friends from the Columbus school as guests, also brought happy times.

At fifteen, Ruth went east to the Perkins Institution for the Blind at Watertown, Massachusetts, near Boston, where the students regarded her curiously as a visitor from the uncivilized West and asked her, in all seriousness, if the *Ladies' Home Journal* ever reached Ohio and whether that state was bothered by Indians. Because the girls treated her as an oddity, it was hard for Ruth to make friends, and she went through bitter hours of homesickness. Later, she had lots of friends there, but she still considers Easterners different from persons in her own locality.

At Perkins, the nostalgic new student had to learn methods of study different from those taught her at Columbus. At the Ohio school, for example, she had been taught arithmetic by a method whereby she arrived

at her solutions entirely by headwork. She says she still cannot trust solutions gained by written work and to this day has to double check by means of her original methods. Mental gymnastics is what she calls it. Music also was taught differently at the new school. Today, Ruth says, schools for the blind have standardized their teaching methods for the most part.

She was graduated from Perkins Institution in 1916 and entered the University of Akron in the fall of that year. She was pledged to *Eta* chapter and was initiated the following spring.

Ruth's classroom work was in specialized subjects. She employed a girl friend, a graduate of the university and a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma, to take notes for her and to act as reader. Later schooling included two years of music at Perkins Institution, and a course in welfare work at Harvard University's graduate school for the blind. Of her school days, Ruth says that she was always too worried to enjoy them; that she has had lots more fun since.

Following a business school course, Ruth then bought typewriter, desk, and dictaphone and went to work in the office of a local attorney. Later, she spent a year in the employ of the Akron Lions Club. On this job, she made a complete survey of blind persons in the community; planned Sunday afternoon programs for them; made personal visits to their homes; and looked after their needs in general.

Today, Ruth Billow is recognized in Ohio as an outstanding friend of the sightless. She is active in the Monthly Welfare Association of Akron and its Ladies' Club, helping to plan dances, bridge parties, and outings. Last year, this club was successful in getting free dancing and bridge lessons for its members, and this year expects to include swimming lessons in its program.

As we have said before, Ruth's principal hobby is travel. She has visited California three times and Florida once, but denies that this was because the movie state Chamber of Commerce and Travel Bureau did a better job than did its southern rival for the tourist

dollars. She has attended Delta Gamma Conventions at Coronado, California; Asheville, North Carolina; Lake Placid, New York; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Mackinac Island, Michigan. She also attends the conventions of the American Association of Workers for the Blind, which meets every two years.

Independent and able to take care of herself, Ruth Billow asks no favors. What promotion work she has helped with in connection with Delta Gamma's interest in welfare work for the blind has been given at the request of other members of the Akron alumnae chapter.

With sure steps and erect posture, she goes about her job of helping others with a pleasant smile and never failing good humor. Evidence of her unselfishness is illustrated by her withdrawal from her business job in mid-depression when others, who needed the work more than she did, were looking for jobs.

Ruth has many friends who are not blind. She finds interest in things which have no attraction for most blind persons. For instance, she likes to have photographs of her friends in her home even though she cannot see them.

Much credit for her normal activities, of course, must go to her lovely family. Her father, mother, and brothers have included her in their every day pursuits. Her father is a Thirty-third degree Mason, for example,

and Ruth thus is a member of the Ladies Oriental Shrine.

Each summer, the Billow family rents a cottage on nearby Lake Erie and entertains groups of Ruth's blind friends three or four days each so that thirty or forty enjoy this vacation each summer.

Last summer, she had a Seeing-Eye dog from Morristown, New Jersey. Although she has since had to return the dog, she considers this period one of her most wonderful experiences. As her preliminary training to adjust her pace to that of the dog, Ruth paid a Boy Scout to walk with her one hour each forenoon, and one hour each afternoon at the rate of three-and-a-half miles an hour.

Novel and interesting are the methods she uses to chart her life along normal happy planes. If a friend, for instance, telephones and invites her to make a social call, Ruth is quick to accept. "Just give me the directions and count the intersecting streets between my home and yours," she will say, "and I'll walk over." And she will reach her destination without trouble. Of course, for jaunts of any distance, she has her car and driver.

She laughs easily and with a spontaneity that is contagious. Those who know her well are not conscious of her blindness. Her friends are legion, and her devotion to Delta Gamma unlimited. The Fraternity owes much to Ruth Billow.