



He's host of *Password*. She's "The Happy Homemaker" of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. They're TV's dynamic duo . . .

ALLEN LUDDEN and BETTY WHITE

Their Secret Password For Happy Homemaking

By LOUISE FARR

The dogs have done embarrassing things all over the lawn. There are four dogs, so that's more than a few piles of embarrassment.

Allen Ludden, host of ABC's long-running game show, *Password*, and his wife of eleven years, TV veteran Betty White, love animals. But right now they're trying to make the place look respectable for the photographer, so Betty is darting around with a long-handled Doggie Poop-Scoop (you must have seen them advertised), muttering under her breath, while Allen tries to distract

us by pointing out a bee-hive in a nearby tree.

"This the way you like to wake up in the morning?" Allen asks Betty through his teeth, as he smiles for the camera. He hasn't had his coffee yet, and insists that he looks bleary-eyed, although he is immaculate in a tan safari jacket.

"Take me away from all this," Betty answers, with a mock-tragic tone, also managing to smile radiantly in spite of no coffee.

Mr. Ludden and Ms. White (Mrs. Ludden is you prefer) represent the tops in television. *Password* won an Emmy as best game show for 1973-

74, and it's carried on more ABC stations than any other game show. In a day when its competitors seem to be cashing in on the less appealing aspects of human nature, *Password* is something of an anomaly. It's competitive and exciting, but its appeal to greed is slight, and no drum rolls announce the amounts of cash to be won; its host, while affable and charming, does not pry into contestants' backgrounds hoping to come up with a bit of smut. In Ludden's words, it's "a pure game" that carries itself without having to be phoned up.

Betty White, of course, is by now

familiar to audiences (if she wasn't before) as the nauseatingly funny Sue Ann Nivens, "The Happy Homemaker" of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Mary Richards describes Sue Ann as "the sort of woman men leave for someone else." And Rhoda Morgenstern says cattily on meeting her, "I love the dimples; I wonder if she made them herself." Betty White plays Sue Ann to perfection: all smiles and sweetness, with more than a hint of ruthlessness that would be apparent to any woman, but is annoyingly overlooked by men, who are charmed by her icky-sweet, beruffled "femininity."

The Luddens live in a white-washed, yellow-shuttered house in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles. Inside, the walls are lined with samples of Betty's needlepoint, and the garden blooms with plants Allen has grown from seedlings. They're extraordinarily productive people, with plenty to say (plus a few bawdy or irreverent asides) about daytime television, their careers, and their marriage. It seems appropriate to let them take over.

Q: Allen, you've been doing *Password* now for thirteen years. Do you ever get bored and think, "Oh, no. Not again"?

ALLEN: It's not ever an issue. It's the best game ever played on television, you see. So, I just go down on Saturday for four or five hours and play a great game with pretty people.

BETTY: You just *cannot* watch it without participating.

ALLEN: There's tremendous audience involvement. They're changing the format this season so it'll be all celebrities. With celebrities you get a different kind of play; I'll need a chair and a whip to control them. See, a celebrity could never hit a contestant and say, "Hey, dummy! That was a dumb clue." But with all celebrities playing they *can* ... and they *do*. I think the mail will probably contest it at first.

Q: How much mail do you get?

ALLEN: Oh, about two thousand letters a week. When Betty and I got married, we got around fifteen thousand.

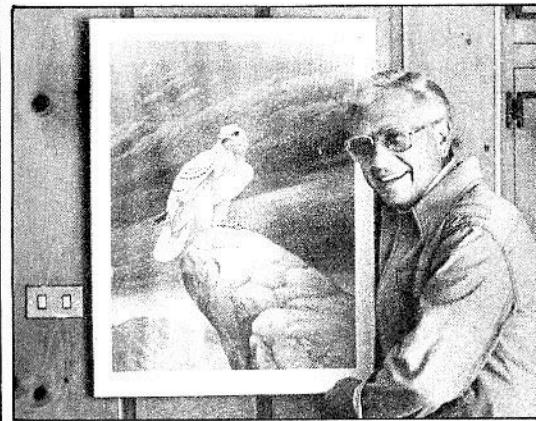
BETTY: Fourteen thousand saying "Don't do it!"

Q: Speaking of marriage, it was a second marriage for both of you. And Betty, you were described as "militantly single" before Allen persuaded you to settle down. Why has it worked?

BETTY: I don't know, but we've got to say *something*, don't we?

Q: Is that a dumb question? It's awfully cliché, I know.

BETTY: No. It's a valid question, and I'd love to know the answer. Allen, you try first.



Allen and Betty enjoy all the arts and take great pleasure in seeking out what pleases them. They're trying to locate young artist Bob Lapsley—who might be somewhere in Texas. If any of you know him, please tell him that Allen and Betty want him to do more paintings for them.



The Luddens unwind amid their charming nature-oriented decor. The pup is one of several around the Ludden homestead—bearing witness to a love for animals. Betty is on the board of the American Humane Society, and, says she, "I'm always working and trying to get the animal thing together with television."

This beautiful bird tapestry is a splendid example of Betty's needlepoint work. Here, they are in their guest house which they retire to in the evenings to watch television or to work on hobbies. The children stay here when they come to visit.

ALLEN: I think because at our age a marriage often has the real problem of mothers whose children have grown, but fathers whose careers have grown so that they're more successful than they were in the early days. And as the man's life comes to fruition, the lady's life comes to a stop. Betty and I missed all that, because she came into my family when my kids were teenagers, and she was a busy professional lady—

BETTY: You make me sound like a hooker!

ALLEN: —a busy professional lady in *broadcasting*; I don't know what she did on the side. But she came in with a whole life of her own that I had to keep up with, and I had a life that she was interested in. We don't have that problem of the man being more active than the woman, or vice versa. And we do enjoy each other.

BETTY: He still asks me . . . Oh, it sounds so corny, but he still asks me for dates. He calls me and says, "Get gussied up, because here's what we're going to do." Also, I'm completely fascinated with my work. And there's the other side to it, which is my interest in animals. I'm on the board of The American Humane Society, and I'm always working and trying to get the animal thing together with television. Allen's completely with me on that, as I am with his game shows.

ALLEN: She's very helpful; gives me ideas.

BETTY: Are you kidding?

ALLEN: Not at all. I'm in partnership now with Grant Tinker, Mary Tyler Moore's husband. We worked together years ago with *G.E. College Bowl*, and now we're developing new game shows. If I'm stuck with an idea, Betty'll come up with a title or something.

BETTY: See, that's bringing our work home, not because it's a drag, but because it's the most fascinating thing to us. I can't think of anything worse than not working. If I'm home for four days, I think my career's come to an end!

Q: Is that why you resisted getting married again?

BETTY: Well, I was happily single. And the idea of settling down, particularly with three teenagers—that's a responsibility. Also, I was involved with somebody else at the time. But Allen courted me, and I don't know why it took me so long to get smart. It was over a year, and then it took me the first two years to settle down and realize how good it was to be married.

ALLEN: The first *five* years.

BETTY: No, no. I simmered down after the first two years.

Q: Your teenagers must have grown up by now. Are you relieved to have gotten through the teenage years?

ALLEN: Yes! You always hear how kids want to get away and have their

freedom? Well, I wanted to let them get away so I could have *my* freedom. They're 26, 25, and 22 now, and they're all doing well. David was just granted a Ford Foundation Far East Fellowship which supports him for two years to finish his doctoral project. He's something of a genius, and he's just gotten married. My oldest daughter, Martha, is married, has just graduated from San Jose State, and is working as a waitress at Bob's Big Boy while her husband finishes his practice teaching. Martha, our youngest, is at Northwestern majoring in biology. They're independent and secure, and we enjoy being in touch with them, but we also enjoy the freedom. I'm talking too much. Talk to Betty.

BETTY: Uh-uh. I'm not bashful, but this is your interview.

Q: Allen, you're a Phi Beta Kappa who's lectured on "The Philosophy of Broadcast Entertainment," and you mentioned that you've formed a company to develop new ideas for television. What do you think daytime television should be, ideally?

ALLEN: I talk about it often—the fact that the industry often plays down the importance of daytime—because it's true that daytime programming sustains the networks. The profit picture is in the daytime, and I believe that the daytime carries over to the night. As the daytime audiences grow more sophisticated—whatever you may think about what's on television during the day, it's more sophisticated than it was twelve or fifteen years ago—the better serials become more sophisticated, and the phony ones die off. It's also true that for the last thirteen years, *Password* has been the number one game show. And it's an intellectual game, a learning device.

BETTY: I wish I had a nickel for every time through the years that a waiter or a cab driver has said, "*Password* helped me learn English."

ALLEN: That says something about the daytime audience. If the networks want to experiment with an audience's intellectual taste, they should do it with daytime audiences; then take what they learn and have it affect nighttime programming. I think there should be a real classy game in prime time. A pure game. See, there are panel shows, classics like *What's My Line?*; there are greed shows like *The Price Is Right* and *Let's Make A Deal*; and people shows like *The Dating Game* and *Tattletales*.

Q: I saw you on *Tattletales*; you were the winners.

BETTY: Oh, then you saw *the* day. We've done it about three times, and everybody says, "Do you know each other at all?"

ALLEN: She didn't know where her vaccination was. She didn't even know she *had* a vaccination.

BETTY: I had to call up every guy in town!

Allen and Betty both doubled up over their coffee cups, struggling to keep from choking. Betty's sense of humor is doubly funny, because one never expects these light, off-color wise cracks from a woman who otherwise seems the epitome of wholesomeness. She has a bawdy laugh to match her sense of humor, which is again doubly funny, because the laugh itself seems a joke. When our hysterics subsided, Allen threw up his hands in mock despair. . .

ALLEN: Why don't you talk to Betty?

Q: I'd love to. Betty, you started in local television, then did *The Betty White Show*, *Life With Elizabeth*, *The Pet Set*, the Pasadena Rose Parade, all those game shows, and *The Jack Paar Shows*. Are you enjoying playing Sue Ann?

BETTY: It's such a switch, I promise you. Because the kitchen's just not my place. I'm not sure it's Sue Ann's best place either.

ALLEN: I think Sue Ann is probably more of an expert in the bedroom.

BETTY: What I love about her is we all know her and we can laugh at her, but this lady cannot laugh at herself. They didn't want me to read for it, though they were looking for "a Betty White type," because Mary and I are friends, and they thought it would be embarrassing if I didn't get it. I was only supposed to do ten shows this season, and now I'm doing thirteen.

Q: I must have been mis-reading you all these years, because I was surprised to see the touch of acid in your performance.

BETTY: Well, my sense of humor's always been a bit on the bawdy side. They always say that poor Betty doesn't know what she's saying. Little do they know. But I think it has to hit *you* funny. You can't just say something funny or dirty for the sake of it.

Q: In 1954, the *L.A. Examiner* said that NBC was looking for a combination Arlene Francis, Mary Margaret McBride, and Kate Smith, and came up with you, whom they called "a female Arthur Godfrey." Any comment ten years later?

BETTY: (Hooting with laughter) Well, Arlene and Mary Margaret McBride are close friends . . . Kate Smith I don't know. Female *Arthur Godfrey*? Allen, that's not funny.

ALLEN: Yes it is. Hey, we've got to go. I've got three run-throughs this afternoon, and Betty's taping five *Liar's Clubs*.

Q: Ooops. Good-bye, and thanks.

For the record, "The Happy Home-maker's" husband served the coffee, and she wouldn't let us shoot pictures in the kitchen because it was such a mess.

I might have guessed.