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# U.S. BALLOONING HALL OF FAME INDUCTION CEREMONY



## JEANNETTE RIDLON PICCARD (January 5th, 1895 ~ May 17th, 1981)

Jeannette was born in Chicago on January 5th, 1895 to Dr. John Frederick Ridlon and Emily Caroline Robinson. Her father John Ridlon, was a physician specializing in orthopedics, a professor of orthopedic surgery at Northwestern University in Chicago, the Chicago Post-Graduate School, Northwestern Woman's Medical School, and the Rush Medical College and the co-founder and president of The American Orthopedic Association. Ridlon enlisted in the US Army Medical Corps at the age of 65, serving in the auxiliary reserves. He retired to Newport, RI, where he served as president of the Newport Medical Society and volunteered his services for school clinics.

Her mother, Emily Caroline Robinson was born and spent part of her childhood in Cottage Grove Minnesota as well as Vermont and Newport, Rhode Island and lived a somewhat privileged life. She gave birth to ten children! Two of the ten were Jeannette and Beatrice who were mirror image twin sisters.

Jeannette grew up in Chicago in a beautiful home on Lake Shore Drive. Her mother was the epitome of the 'Victorian' mother, from the days of 'children are to be seen and not heard' complete with nannies who did most of the heavy lifting! While she had a life of privilege, as did her mother, Jeannette experienced tragedy at a very young age with the loss of her sister Beatrice, as well as two older sisters.

The family spent summers in Newport, Rhode Island with Emily's mother Margaret Robinson on Seaview Avenue.

### EDUCATION:

**1914:** Graduated from The Shipley Preparatory School in Bryn Mawr

**1918:** Graduated from Bryn Mawr ~ Bachelors degree in philosophy and psychology

**1919:** Graduated from University of Chicago ~ Masters in Organic Chemistry

**1942:** Graduated from University of Minnesota ~ Doctorate in education.

**1973:** General Theology Seminary New York with a certificate of study.

### FAMILY:

At University of Chicago Jeannette met visiting professor Jean Piccard ~ her Organic Chemistry Professor and Swiss pioneer in balloon technology was already well known, as was his twin brother Auguste. For some reason, Jeannette, an already accomplished young woman found herself shy and intimidated around Dr. Piccard! She could barely speak with him or make eye contact. Dr. Piccard would often take his students

outside for lectures where they would picnic on the lawns of the University of Chicago. It was here that Jeannette and her professor had their first conversation and cemented their intellectual attraction for each other.

After graduating with her masters degree in organic chemistry, 24 year old Jeannette asked her father, "If I let him, Jean Piccard will ask me to marry him. Shall I let him?" Dr. Ridlon replied, "If you believe that there is no other man in the world like him—and, if you are ready to go with him anywhere in the world— then yes, otherwise no."

Jeannette and Jean married the summer after she received her master's degree. They moved to Switzerland where Jean was born, and his family and beloved twin brother August were. Jean assumed a position as head of the chemistry department at the University of Lausanne.

Their three sons were born in Lausanne: John A. Piccard ~ a researcher and developer for DuPont, Paul J. Piccard ~ A Political Science Professor in the School Of Government at Florida State University, where he was well loved by his students ~ and Donald L. Piccard ~ both gas and hot air balloon pilot, a pioneer in developing the sport balloon and hot air balloon manufacturer.

After seven years in Lausanne the family moved back to the United States in 1926 after Jean accepted a professorship at MIT.



Piccard Family Photo

### **JEANNETTES GREATEST HITS:**

- 1934 ~ July 27 First licensed female balloon pilot in the US
- 1934 ~ October 23 First woman to pilot a balloon to the stratosphere ~ 10.9 miles ~
- 1934 ~ Harmon Trophy ~ International League of Aviators
- 1935 ~ Certificate of Reward & Performance ~ National Aeronautic Association
- 1965 ~ First William Randolph Lovelace II Award ~ American Astronautical Association
- 1968 ~ University of Minnesota Alumni Association ~ Outstanding Achievement Award
- 1963 ~ 1970 Consultant to Robert Gilruth: director of NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center
- 1971 ~ Ordained a Deacon of the Episcopal Church
- 1971 ~ The Piccard family donated a trophy to be used as the award for the National Hot Air Balloon Championship. It is called the Jeannette Piccard Championship Trophy.
- 1974 ~ July 29 First woman ordained ~ Episcopal Priest
- 1977 ~ Hobart and William Smith Colleges ~ Geneva, New York, honorary Doctorate of Divinity
- 1979 ~ Bryn Mawr Commencement speech ~ granddaughter Elizabeth's graduation
- 1998 ~ Posthumous induction ~ International Space Hall of Fame
- 2024 ~ Posthumous induction into the US Ballooning Hall of Fame

### **Century Of Progress**

In 1933 The Chicago Worlds Fair was committed to demonstrating the importance of science in everyday life. The Science Advisory Committee felt that a balloon flight would be wondrous for a twelve year old "boy" to witness.

Jean's mirror image twin Auguste, had already gone to the stratosphere and the head of concessions for the fair wanted Auguste to make the flight. However, Auguste declined and suggested his most capable twin bother Dr. Jean Piccard. Jean did not have a balloon pilot's license nor was he an American, and at the time did not have the recognition his brother Auguste had. The Worlds Fair committee made the decision that the stratosphere flight would be made by the US Navy ~ American naval officer "Tex" Settle...NOT a foreigner!

However, they needed Jean's input for the gondola design as he had worked with Auguste on the design, and knew the concept better than anyone. There was the possibility for Jean to be a part of the flight to do his cosmic rays experiments. When the Chicago News headline read "Settle to Go Aloft Alone in Piccard Flight" that was off the table! Turns out that was a blessing in disguise!

Settles' flight didn't end well as shortly after take-off the balloon descended rapidly to the ground due to a valve rope that caught in the balloon's fabric and tore it.

November 1933 Settle ascended with a US Marine Major Chester Fordnoy to the stratosphere reaching 11.8 miles. The Americans "Century Of Progress" Balloon was brought down in a swamp in New Jersey ~ close to where the Piccard's lived in Swarthmore. As previously agreed upon were now back in the hands of Dr. Jean and Jeannette Piccard. Only after Jean stripped down to his underwear and waded through the water to retrieve the balloon and drag it back to shore!

### The Piccard Stratosphere Flight 1934

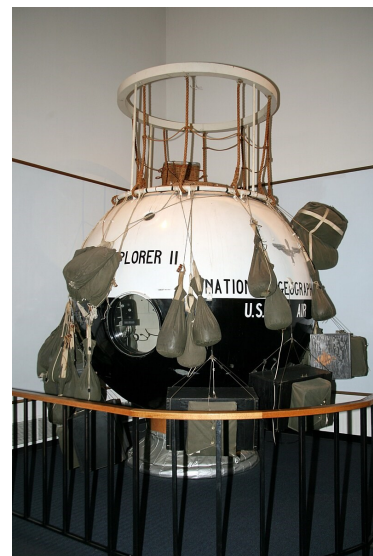
The Piccard plan was for Jeannette to fly the balloon from its airtight, pressurized gondola to the stratosphere. She was a chemist in her own right, but it would be Jean who would collect the data. The effect of cosmic rays in the upper air and the effect of radiation, where they are not altered by the earth's atmosphere must be studied...therefore Jeannette would be the pilot! The plan seemed simple enough to them! What could possibly stand in their way?

There were roadblocks at every turn, which to some may seem impossible. Not to the Piccard's as they were steadfast ~ nothing was going to stop them. Very quickly they were faced with obstacles. Jeannette's will had been tested before. She was determined and ready! Bring it on!!

Finding sponsors was the first and turned out to be the most difficult to resolve. Dow Chemical and longtime Piccard supporter Goodyear Zeppelin backed out when they learned Jeannette would be piloting the balloon. The Piccard's appealed to the National Geographic Society, but they "would have nothing to do with supporting a woman ~ a **MOTHER** ~ pilot a balloon to the stratosphere ~ into danger."

Eventually the Piccard's found their sponsors! Henry Ford ~ who was progressive for the time was not fazed that the pilot was going to be a woman. He offered the use of his airfield and hangar at the Ford Airport in Dearborn Michigan ~ his support encouraged others to commit to the project. Peoples Outfitting Company (a Detroit based department store) ~ Grigsby Grunow Radio Company and The Detroit Aero Club agreed to sponsor the flight. In addition, Jeannette raised money by selling commemorative stamps and souvenirs that she designed.

Sponsors ~ done! Next flying lessons. Jeannette contacted Goodyear's Aeronautics Department asking if she could attend their pilot instructor school. When her request was refused because "These lessons are only available to Goodyear employees" Jeannette wrote the following letter: "My dear Mr. Young, in spite of your very courteous refusal I am going to return to the charge, hoping that persistence will be crowned with success. If there were any college or university in the country offering a course in aeronautics with practical application in ballooning, I should register at that college."



Capsule at Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL.



Piccard's before Stratosphere flight 1934



Balloonist and Gordon Bennett Cup winner Edward Hill was suggested by Goodyear. He wholeheartedly agreed to be the flight instructor. If it was unclear whom the lessons were for, Jeannette as opposed to Jean, he wasn't fazed.

The cost for the lessons were around \$217.00, and met the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale requirements for balloon pilots: 6 training flights of 2 hours each. Spring of 1934, Jeannette got to work with Edward Hill as her flight instructor.

Henry Ford brought Orville Wright to his airfield to observe one of Jeannette's lessons. 8 year old Donald, helping as ground crew for his parents never forgot that day ~ "Orville Wright took my hand, his eye contact, his kindness and firm handshake has stuck with me my entire life. This important man made me feel very special!" I witnessed many times, when Donald was introduced to a young person, he or she receiving the same respect!

Mr. Wright, knowing the dangers this young boys' mother could face, was willing to lend his name and prestige to the Piccard stratosphere flight, with a woman at the helm!

On June 16, 1934, Jeannette made her first solo balloon flight into the atmosphere. On July 27 she completed the required flight training and was awarded her license from the National Aeronautic Association of the USA. She was the first female Spherical Balloon pilot in the United States. **Now she could take her husband to the stratosphere!**

### October 23 ~ 1934

October 23, 1934, throughout the night and into the early morning darkness at the airfield in Dearborn, Michigan their balloon was slowly inflated with the hydrogen gas. Amongst the 300 man ground crew ~ only 6 had ever seen a balloon! 45,000 enthusiastic spectators, had gathered throughout the night to watch while history was being made! Given the failed attempts from other balloonists, there was some tension in the air. Some feared for the couples' safety, their children becoming orphans!

On board was liquid oxygen, 500 lbs. of instruments including 168 Geiger counters and a Strosse Chamber. These would record the results of Jeans cosmic rays research during the flight. For him, this flight was two fold, his very important research, hopefully an altitude record, and their safety!

Along for the ride was their youngest son Donalds' pet turtle "Fleur de Lys," as well as a homemade angel food cake! Jeannette said "Just in case we meet any angels up there to share it with!"

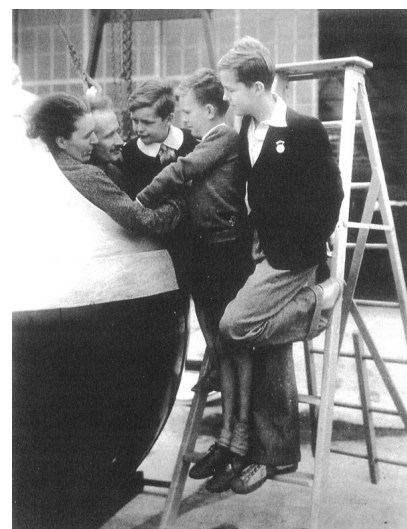
While the weather reports predicted clear skies there was a mass of low hanging clouds ~ this did not deter the Piccard's from going forward with their flight. Coming down through the clouds could be a different story!

During the pre-launch ceremony a small band played The Star Spangled Banner and their sons gave their parents a bouquet of flowers. They said goodbye to their children and were ready for take off! TNT and blasting caps were used to release the lines from the balloon and to remotely release external ballast (sandbags) from inside the gondola! Jean's revolutionary concept became standard practice under NASA director Robert Gilruth ~ to release the door of the space capsules.

A crosswind had caught the balloon and a landline wasn't released by the detonation! Jeannette was



Gas Balloon training flight. Jeannette Piccard, Jean Felix Piccard flight instruction Edward Hall.



visible to the crowd of thousands, as well as to her sons, outside the hatch of the gondola! She released the line manually as her ground crew pushed the gondola up avoiding contact with the ground! In a 7' enclosed magnesium~alloy gondola beneath a 600,000 cubic~foot hydrogen balloon Jeannette Piccard waved to her sons as they called out "Good bye Mother!" Up they rose, through the clouds and out of sight!

As they ascended through the clouds, the balloon was jostled, Jeannette dropped ballast and they were above the clouds to calmer air and sunshine! She discovered the rope that controlled the vent valve at the apex of the balloon was obstructed, and needed to be released immediately! Without releasing the line it would be impossible to control the release of gas and the descent of the balloon would be impossible!

10,000' above Lake Erie Jeannette leaned out of the hatch, stepped up and out of the gondola onto the rigging that connected the balloon to the gondola. Her foot slipped on some lead ballast that had been released earlier during takeoff! She regained her footing, and released the line! When she got back into the gondola Jean looked puzzled. He was so engrossed in his work he didn't notice she was gone!! They sealed the hatch and pressurized the gondola ~ soon the air would be too thin to breathe.

As they ascended, the altimeter steadily rose: 30,000 40,000 50,000 feet! Jean had designed a frost free window for the gondola, which was later used for bomber jets in WW2 . With the cloud cover stretching over a wide distance there was little to see below them, which caused concern. They didn't know for certain where they were. How fast were they moving horizontally with the wind as opposed to vertically, could they stay aloft and avoid drifting over the Atlantic? Would they succeed in the quest to complete the purpose of the flight?

At 57,579' the balloon stopped for a brief moment suspended nearly 11 miles above the earth ~ could they have released more ballast to break the previous records of Settle and Fordney ~ yes! However, given the unknown ~ where they were above the United States, and how much time they had before the wind pushed them over the Atlantic?! The decision was made. Jeannette began her descent, which had to be extremely controlled, using the ropes to vent the hydrogen gas, as coming down too fast could result in a very hard landing!

After 4 hours in the air their descent began. Holding the valve open for 90 seconds at regular intervals Jeannette released the rest of her ballast and landed near Cadiz Ohio ~ nearly 300 miles from Dearborn Air Field! The balloon settled in the tops of an elm tree, and the gondola fell 15 ~ 20'! Jean suffered a few cracked ribs and Jeannette was bruised ~ Fleur de Lys seemed perfectly fine! The Stosse Chamber and Geiger counters borrowed from Dr. Swann were not damaged!

Reporters and onlookers surrounded the Piccard's...Jeannette was asked if this was where she planned to land? Half jokingly she said "My plan was to land at the White House in Washington DC ~ I thought Eleanor Roosevelt would be tickled ~ a WOMAN landing on the White House lawn would have pleased her to no end!" Jeannette Ridlon Piccard had just flown her husband to 57,579' so he could study cosmic rays! Her record stood for another 29 years!

From Jeannette's flight record: "We gradually worked our way down to the tops of the clouds and from the tops of the clouds we listened...we bounced along over the tops of the clouds...below 10,000' the door, the hatch, was open and we listened for what was underneath. Finally we came down through the clouds. We dropped 800 lbs of ballast, landing in some trees that punctured the balloon."

"The last entry in a post flight record that I prepared expressed my feelings at the time: Everything is over, everything that is, except the gathering up of our equipment, and the fragments of our once beautiful balloon." Jeannette Piccard



Jeannette visiting with reporters after the flight.

Following the Stratosphere Flight the Piccard's received much publicity...while some still felt that a mother shouldn't have taken such risks Jeannette was asked by a reporter if she was afraid. Her reply was, "Even if one were afraid to die, there is so much interest in a stratosphere trip that one does not have time to be afraid. It is too absorbing, too interesting." She and her husband raised her three boys to not be afraid...to be aware of possible danger, respect it and be prepared for any outcome. This way of life was certainly passed down to their grandchildren, great grandchildren, and now great great grandchildren!

The New York Times described their feat as "the first such flight made in the United States in which a balloon remained under control for the entire flight" and "the first successful stratospheric flight made through a layer of clouds." Under the watch of a woman!

Jeannette and Jean toured the United States for nearly two years, delivering lectures about their stratosphere flight. During the summer break from school the boys went on a cross country camping trip which included lectures along the way. Starting in Maine and ending in Washington!

They had a scheduled lecture in San Francisco and pulled into the drive of the St. Francis Hotel in their automobile covered in road dust! Out piled 3 boys and their parents ~ the bellman came running out and exclaimed "Excuse me, the hotel is full and this parking is for hotel guests only! You need to leave immediately!" The press was there expecting their arrival ~ when they recognized who they were, the Piccard family was surrounded with reporters and cameras!

Today, the Piccard Gondola is permanently and proudly exhibited in the Transportation Gallery of the Museum of Science + Industry in Chicago! Suspended from the ceiling 30' above the floor it is quite impressive! It gives one a sense of what it would have felt like to be amongst the spectators that October morning in the dark as the Piccard's headed for the stratosphere! "Piccard Stratosphere Flight" is now permanently painted on the gondola.



Capsule at Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL.

### 1936

In 1936 John Ackerman, an aeronautics professor at the University of Minnesota invited Jean a teaching position. When Jean accepted, the dean made clear that Jeannette was part of the deal! They were not only partners in parenting, but in science, invention, and engineering as well!

The family settled in Minneapolis on East River Road, a mile walk to campus. Dr. Piccard was a favorite professor of his students, as was Jeannette. She was often in the classroom teaching alongside her husband. Sunday afternoons a well loved tradition began in their home. An "open house" was held for students to join the Piccard family, where science, chemistry, aeronautical engineering and world issues were discussed and debated! It was a cozy atmosphere with dishes made by Jean and Jeannette, and a fire would burn on a cold day.

Jean and Jeannette were invited to join one of their students and her husband on a trip to Northern Minnesota. They discovered a property for sale that interested them. With a professors salary it wasn't possible to make such a purchase, but eventually they were able to do so. This was a place where the family spent their summers, and loved the adventures of living on a lake. Fallen birch branches were laid to form paths around the property. Jean's rule then, that still stands...do not venture off the paths as the flora and fauna must not be disturbed! Five generations of Piccard's have loved this special place, and will continue for generations to come.

At the age of 47 Jeannette earned her PhD in education at the University of Minnesota, where she devised a plan for future student housing for married couples with and without children!

### June 16, 1963

Jeannette's altitude record stood for 29 years until 1963 when the Russian cosmonaut ~ 26 year old Valentina Tereshkova ~ a Russian Engineer ~ orbited the earth 48 times on Vostok 6!

On October of 1963, Don Piccard attended the FAI international conference held in Mexico City where he met Cosmonaut Tereshkova! "Comrade Tereshkova, when I told my mother I was perhaps going to meet you. she asked me to send her greetings...You may not know who my mother is. She is Jeannette Piccard, who piloted a balloon to 57,579' in 1934, more than two miles into Physiological Space. She wanted to congratulate you on your marvelous achievement, and on behalf of all the women in America to welcome you to Space!"

Cosmonaut Tereshkova said to Don, "I know very well who your mother is, and I am most appreciative of her good wishes, and please give her all my love!"

While there are some who agree to disagree ~ "physiological" space begins at 50,000'.

### NASA 1963 ~ 1970

January 28, 1963 Jean Felix Piccard died on his birthday, 10 months after the death of his mirror image twin brother Auguste Piccard. Jeannette lost her partner in life. What will be next for Dr. Piccard?

On a visit to Minneapolis former grad student of Jean Piccard, Robert Gilruth, now head of NASA's manned space center, was speaking about the space program and saw Jeannette in the audience. He recruited her to Houston hiring her during the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions ~ Project Apollo, and Apollo 11's first crewed Moon landing in 1969!

Her new job as a proponent for the space program included publicity lecture tours as well as a consultant to Mr. Gilruth. Jeanette ventured to share ideas with Gilruth and saw a few applied ~ the design of a periscope for the man-to-the-moon Apollo spacecraft was one. Jeans invention of detonating the ballast used on the stratosphere flight was adopted by NASA. This was utilized during the building of Project Apollo to open the hatch after landing in the ocean.

Jeannette enjoyed the "NASA years" immensely. Dr. Piccard believed in the Space Program. She traveled the United States speaking to students and community groups with energy, passion, and humor. She loved teaching and lecturing to people of all ages, and answered every question as if it was the first time it had been asked! After the first space-walk by astronaut Ed White in June 1965, she concluded her presentations with a film of that walk. It continued to thrill her!

In July of 1969, just weeks before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon she spoke to high school students at Northrop Auditorium. She inspired them to study science and engineering ~ especially the young women! In those days some girls were beginning to take wood shop as opposed to home economics! Thankfully, things were changing! Jeannette had been breaking the glass ceiling for years and found the women's liberation movement encouraging!

Director Gilruth made a point of describing Piccard in his oral history, recalling his time in the aeronautical engineering department at University of Minnesota..."She was very bright, had her own doctor's degree, and was at least half of the brains of that family, technically as well as otherwise! She was always in the classroom when Jean Piccard was lecturing or, almost always. She was something! She was good!"

In 1970 her post at NASA was finished and at 75 years young she began her next chapter!



### The Final Frontier ~ The Priesthood

The Ridlon family were Episcopalians, however did not attend church regularly. As a young girl, on



Sunday, Jeannette began to join some neighbors at their Episcopal Church in Chicago.

One night when her mother Emily sat next to Jeannette's bed she asked her 11 year old daughter what she thought she would like to be when she grew up! Jeannette recalled "When I said I wanted to be a priest, poor darling, she burst into tears and ran out of the room. That was the only time I saw my Victorian mother run." She always told this story with a bit of a grin!

Jeannette voluntarily attended confirmation classes the next year, took her first communion, and established a daily spiritual practice that would last throughout her lifetime. While she attended church regularly as a parishioner her goal was to be at the pulpit ~ Jeannette began her pursuit of the priesthood that took 68 years to come to fruition!

While at Bryn Mawr College as a freshman, Jeannette shared her ambition to be an Episcopal Priest with President M. Carey Thomas. Her response...with a smile and a nod "I'm sure, my dear, that by the time you graduate that will be entirely possible." Having that support and forward thinking was very most important and encouraged her even more. Women didn't even have the right to vote at that point ~ so women in the Priesthood? She had the faith that at some point her goal would come to fruition...Jeannette was not a quitter!

In 1916, Jeannette wrote a 14 page assignment at Bryn Mawr titled, "Should Women Be Admitted to the Priesthood of the Anglican Church?" There she argued, "In the study of history we note that as civilization increases, the state's of women becomes more nearly equal to man...today, woman has almost obtained equality with men. In some nations women may vote and hold civil office equally with men. All but one profession is now open to women: That is the Church." She stated that educated women are equal to men, that their mortality is "equal if not superior," and that women live longer and are better at "bearing suffering and privation" ~ qualities she would demonstrate in her own life as she faced down gender-based barriers.

In 1965, Jeannette met the Reverend Denzil Carty of St. Phillip's Episcopal Church, a predominantly Black parish in St. Paul, Minnesota. With his encouragement, Jeannette applied to become a lay reader, however, Episcopal law stated that only "Godly men" could read. So she wrote a motion proposing a change in canon law, which passed at the General Convention of the Whole Church in 1967. In 1970, when the church allowed women to become deacons, Jeannette studied Church history, liturgy, and theology and was ordained as a deacon, serving at St. Phillips. In 1972, at age 77, Jeannette spent a year studying at The General Theological Seminary in New York City, then returned to St. Paul.

### July 29, 1974

At the Church of the Advocate, a Black church in North Philadelphia led by The Reverend Paul Washington, a civil rights advocate, Jeannette's childhood dream...the one thing she wanted most in her life came to fruition. Three retired bishops would ordain the 11 women. These women knew Jeannette's dream and her path to the priesthood was a long one. She fought the good fight for 68 years. At the insistence of the other 10 deacons, Jeannette, the oldest at age 79, was to be the first!

Surrounded by her three sons and Reverend Denzil Carty, Jeannette knelt at Bishop Daniel Corrigan's feet as he held her head in his hands and spoke the words making her the first female priest in the nearly 200 year history of the Episcopal Church. More than 2,000 people and all the major national news outlets attended the service, which lasted more than three hours. In a videotaped tribute to his mother in 2004, Paul Piccard recounted, "The sense of the Holy Spirit in that place was nearly tangible."

Two weeks later, at an emergency meeting of the House of Bishops, Presiding Bishop John Maury Allin declared, "**The ladies are not priests.**" The women faced threats, harassment, and intense anger. The Reverend Dr.





Suzanne Hiatt, a member of the group that came to be known as “The Philadelphia 11”, later said, “In retrospect, to have been ordained ‘irregularly’ is the only way for women to have done it.” It took the Episcopal Church two more years to open the priesthood to women at the 1976 General Convention in Minneapolis.

Jeannette served as an Episcopal priest for seven years at St. Phillips in St. Paul Minnesota until her death at 86. Jeannette felt truly accepted at this parish because as a mostly black community, its members had experienced discrimination—and they understood her struggle to become a woman priest.

Jeannette was a hospital chaplain at St. Luke’s Hospital in St Paul, in addition to serving as associate rector to Father Denzil Carty. She had a special gift for ministering to sick and lonely older people ~ some who were much younger than she was ~ in St Paul’s nursing homes ~ As Jeannette said, “It was a great joy to be able to give the spiritual food we need for our health and well-being.”

### **A Few of Thousands of Quotes**

In spring 1919 she asked her father, “If I let him, Jean Piccard will ask me to marry him. Shall I let him?”

Dr. Ridlon replied, “If you believe that there is no other man in the world like him—and, if you are ready to go with him anywhere in the world— then yes, otherwise no.”

“I didn’t go up with him, he went up with me,” Jeannette quipped in an interview years after the stratosphere flight. Her husband needed a pilot, and she became one.

Jeannette and Jean Piccard. University Archives

“I’m not going to have it said there’s any place I can’t go. If you can’t do it, it’s something you’ve got to do.”— Jeannette Ridlon Piccard, Class of 1918, quoted in *Notable American Women, A Biographical Dictionary* (Harvard University Press, 2004)

“Some people say that we were lost, that we could not see the earth and did not know where we were. It is true that we could not see the earth. A heavy layer of clouds four thousand feet thick hid it from view but we were not lost. We knew exactly where we were. We were fifty feet below our balloon and fifty-seven thousand feet above earth. What we did not know was what phase of the earth was turned toward us.” Jeannette Piccard

“You go where the wind goes. You feel like part of the air. You almost feel like part of eternity.”

“There are hardly any families in the history of exploration with a wider, more ambitious or creative vision”  
- Neil Armstrong

### **Jeannette The Grandmother**

We were very blessed to have had Jean and Jeannette for grandparents! They had relationships with all of their grandchildren and would see us in Minneapolis, or when they would visit their sons and their families. When summer came most of us would be together up at the lake.

Those summers were filled with adventures! Swimming ~ fishing ~ canoeing ~ s’mores at the fire pit ~ going into town for Bismarck’s at the donut shop ~ Scrabble ~ boating and of course fishing!! Granny would teach any and all of her grandchildren who wanted to learn, to fish ~ the best place to dig for worms ~ how to safely bait your hook and clean your catch. I remember her patience, and how we’d talk softly, or not at all, while waiting for a bite! That patience we all witnessed was a good lesson!

Jeannette took great joy in making the Piccard family recipe for fondue...and her bread pudding she would make during the holidays! It was a blessing to be exposed to the incredible conversations during a meal, any meal, especially when we were all together!

She had a wonderful sense of humor and could tell a great story including all of the important details! She loved hearing our stories as well, especially the ones that went on forever with all the details...followed by questions!

A force to be reckoned with is a good way to describe her! She had very clear boundaries and didn’t hesitate to let you know what those were...in the kindest way! She would ask questions, encourage us to be curious, independent, and strong willed. If we were trying to accomplish something difficult, she would only jump in

when necessary! She was funny, told a great story, intelligent beyond words, and had a great sense of adventure!

When she was 64 she water-skied for what would be the last time! She was able to get up with no problem! Just not ALL the way up! The visual of the boat passing by the dock with Granny in a squatting position ~ loving every minute of it ~ is forever etched in my memory! Three generations of Piccard's cheered her on that day!!

There was never any question that she loved us, and wanted us to do our best! When I was 16 she knew I wanted to be an actor. She mailed me two articles about two different actresses ~ I do not remember the first... but she did not have a college education. The second was Katherine Hepburn, a Bryn Mawr graduate! SHE was the one who was used as the example to emulate! You can do whatever you want to do...but first...you need an education!!

Jeannette was an incredible example of what a woman can accomplish! I am positive that none of the Piccard women in my generation question whether they can do whatever they set out to do. Our grandmother, Jeannette Ridlon Piccard defined the term "GRIT"!

### **Grandchildren ~ Memories**

**Bob:** "Jeannette was in a meeting with a bishop and he was explaining to her that women can NOT be priests because men and women are different races, and only the male race can be priests because priests are fathers. So Granny said..."Bishop have you ever met a pure bred male?"

**Jane:** "I still think of her often now that I'm a grandmother myself!" "She was a wonderful influence in my life." "Shortly after the ordination, there was some discussion about the appropriate title for the women priests. When asked if she should be addressed as "Mother Piccard," she said "No. Priests are addressed as Father. I am a priest, therefore I am a Father." It was one of her groundbreaking attempts that did not succeed!"

**Ann:** "One summer at the lake Granny taught me how to fish! We cleaned my fish on the pine table on the front porch of the big cabin. Every Sunday morning Granny had communion where all were welcome. One of those Sundays I remember thinking... Oh...this is where we cleaned our fish!! So it struck me as incongruent that we had communion on the same table where we cleaned my fish...but at least she used a white tablecloth!!

**Wendy:** "I loved playing Scrabble with Granny at the lake during the summer!"

**Mary Louise:** After Granny was ordained I took communion from her at St Phillips in St Paul...while kneeling I looked up at her as she put the 'cracker' in my palms ~ she smiled and winked at me! I see her to this day...the look between us is forever etched in my heart!

The summer of 1969 my parents were ballooning in Europe and I had the opportunity to spend that time with Granny at the lake...one of the best times of my life! I wanted to waterski so she rigged a rear view mirror to the windshield of the "motorboat" as we didn't have a spotter! "If you fall I'll be able to see you without taking my eyes off 'the road'...finding a solution to a problem, as well as asking me what I would do!

I took my acoustic guitar with me that summer and she insisted that I play and sing 'Puff The Magic Dragon' for her at least 3 times a day! Along with any Bob Dylan tunes that I knew!

We had wonderful conversations filled with many questions! One of mine for her was "What was your first memory?" She told me about losing her twin sister Beatrice. The girls were 3 years old playing outside with their toy stove and matches ~ one was lit and Beatrice's perfectly starched dress caught on fire. Five days later when John and Emily Ridlon were told Beatrice would not survive, they had Jeannette say goodbye to her twin. This was Jeannettes very first memory. She said "I've never felt alone because I know Beatrice is always

with me.”

Then I asked her about the first time she saw my grandfather: “I was standing on the landing of the staircase in the Chemistry building [University of Chicago] talking with a fellow classmate ~ I looked up and saw the handsomest man I’d ever seen!”

When she entered the lecture hall for her first class she learned that tall handsome man was her professor! How could she know then what her future would hold!

103 years later when I was in Chicago speaking at the Museum of Science and Industry for David Hanna’s book signing, I went to the Chemistry building at the University. I stood on the very same landing. I looked up and imagined my grandfather standing at the top of the staircase, then took the stairs, ran my hand along the thick wooden railing that I know my grandparents touched a thousand times! I had a feeling they were both with me...

That summer month was filled with never ending scrabble games, fishing, swimming, looking at the moon, hours of talking, sharing stories and learning lessons that have stayed with me all my life! My Uncle Paul and Aunt Betty eventually arrived with their kids. Having my favorite cousin Mary there, added to an already spectacular summer! I had to share Granny ~ but that bond between us was stronger than ever and continues to this day.

Our grandmother lived her life the only way that she knew how...with honesty, faith, love, humor, strength and GRIT!

### **Jeannette Ridlon Piccard passed away peacefully and fulfilled on May 17, 1981**

#### **From Mary Louise Piccard:**

Thank you to the U.S Ballooning Hall Of Fame for posthumously inducting my Grandmother Dr. Jeannette Ridlon Piccard, 43 years after her death. Our family is honored and I know Jeannette would be as well.

Rather than focusing solely on her Stratosphere flight, I shared with you her life as a whole. While being the “the first women to reach the stratosphere”, Jeannette was more than that. She was a well educated scholar, an accomplished woman, wife and mother. Her life long road to the Priesthood, and all that took, was something she was very proud of! She spent her life fighting for women's rights. If Jeannette were here, she would say to all the women here today, from the youngest to the oldest...You can do ANYTHING a man can do...and often times do it better! She may even add “Women are the stronger sex!”

Thank you ~ Mary Louise Piccard  
July 2024

#### **Resources**

Most of what is written here comes from my memories, family stories, conversations with my Grandmother, my dad Don Piccard, my uncle Paul. Thank you to my family and my cousins, for their memories ~ especially Mary for all of our conversations and a lot of ‘you’ve GOT this’!

Thank you to my friend David Hanna for his inspiration and encouragement ~ and for writing **Broken Icarus**...it is brilliantly written and a must-have for any flight enthusiasts bookcase!

Thank you Ames Sheldon ~ Bryn Mawr class of 1970 ~ Ms Sheldon and I had a wonderful conversation about Jeannette and she was thrilled to have me use her article from the Bryn Mawr Bulletin as one of my references

Thank you to Sheryl Hill who wrote her Ohio State University grad school dissertation on Jeannette, which is so well done! During our recent conversation I told I would not be using footnotes for this piece but assured her that the link for her dissertation would be included!

The Library of Congress: The Piccard Papers.

**Broken Icarus: The 1933 Chicago World's Fair, the Golden Age of Aviation, and the Rise of Fascism ~ David Hanna**

David Hanna. 2022. *Broken Icarus*. Rowman & Littlefield. <https://bibliotecacomplutense.odiotk.es/opac?id=00755957>.

The Bryn Mawr Bulletin Fall 2023 ~ First Times Two

<https://www.brynmawr.edu/bulletin/first-times-two>

Ames Sheldon

CE+HD CONNECT News The University of Minnesota

Heaven and Earth July 2019

CE+HD CONNECT News The University of Minnesota ~

Remembering Another Milestone In Space May 7, 2019

Burstyn, Joan N. 1990. "Jeannette Ridlon Piccard". *Past and Promise, Lives of New Jersey Women*. <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/54795071>

[http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ohiou1241189875](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ohiou1241189875)

Hill, Sheryl K. 2009. "Until I have won" vestiges of coverture and the invisibility of women in the twentieth century: a biography of Jeannette Ridlon Piccard. <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/476770647>

**The Philadelphia Eleven**, released in the fall of 2023, tells the story of Jeannette and the ten other women who bravely broke new ground for the Episcopal Church 50 years ago! 1974 ~ 2024

In addition there are numerous films, interviews, books, articles, biographies about Drs. Jean and Jeannette Piccard that you will find in libraries and the internet that you may find interesting.

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