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Pauline Phillips, Flinty Adviser to Millions as Dear Abby, Dies at 94

By **MARGALIT FOX**

Dear Abby: My wife sleeps in the raw. Then she showers, brushes her teeth and fixes our breakfast — still in the buff. We're newlyweds and there are just the two of us, so I suppose there's really nothing wrong with it. What do you think? — Ed

Dear Ed: It's O.K. with me. But tell her to put on an apron when she's frying bacon.

Pauline Phillips, a California housewife who nearly 60 years ago, seeking something more meaningful than mah-jongg, transformed herself into the syndicated columnist Dear Abby — and in so doing became a trusted, tart-tongued adviser to tens of millions — died on Wednesday in Minneapolis. She was 94.

Her syndicate, Universal Uclick, announced her death on its Web site. Mrs. Phillips, who had been ill with Alzheimer's disease for more than a decade, was a longtime resident of Beverly Hills, Calif., but lived in Minneapolis in recent years to be near family.

If Damon Runyon and Groucho Marx had gone jointly into the advice business, their column would have read much like Dear Abby's. With her comic and flinty yet fundamentally sympathetic voice, Mrs. Phillips helped wrestle the advice column from its weepy Victorian past into a hard-nosed 20th-century present:

Dear Abby: I have always wanted to have my family history traced, but I can't afford to spend a lot of money to do it. Have you any suggestions? — M. J. B. in Oakland, Calif.

Dear M. J. B.: Yes. Run for a public office.

Mrs. Phillips began her life as the columnist Abigail Van Buren in 1956. She quickly became known for her astringent, often genteelly risqué, replies to queries that included the marital, the medical and sometimes both at once:

Dear Abby: Are birth control pills deductible? — Bertie

Dear Bertie: Only if they don't work.

She was also known for her long, much-publicized professional rivalry with her identical twin sister, the advice columnist Ann Landers.

Long before the Internet — and long before the pervasive electronic confessionals of Dr. Ruth, Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, et al. — the Dear Abby column was a forum for the public discussion of private problems, read by tens of millions of people in hundreds of newspapers around the world.

It is difficult to overstate the column's influence on American culture at midcentury and afterward: in popular parlance, Dear Abby was for decades an affectionate synonym for a trusted, if slightly campy, confidante.

On television, the column has been invoked on shows as diverse as “Three’s Company,” “Dexter” and “Mr. Ed,” where, in a 1964 episode in which Mrs. Phillips played herself, the title character, pining (in an equine way, of course) for a swinging bachelor pad of his own, writes her a letter.

Over the years, recording artists including [the Hearts](#), [John Prine](#) and [the Dead Kennedys](#) have released a string of different songs titled “Dear Abby.”

Even now, Dear Abby's reach is vast. (Mrs. Phillips's daughter, Jeanne Phillips, took over the column unofficially in 1987 and officially in 2000.) According to Universal Uclick, Dear Abby appears in about 1,400 newspapers worldwide, has a daily readership of more than 110 million — in print and on its Web site, [dearabby.com](#) — and receives more than 10,000 letters and e-mails a week.

Politically left of center, Mrs. Phillips was generally conservative when it came to personal deportment. As late as the 1990s, she was reluctant to advise unmarried couples to live together. Yet beneath her crackling one-liners lay an imperturbable acceptance of the vagaries of modern life:

Dear Abby: Our son married a girl when he was in the service. They were married in February and she had an 8 1/2-pound baby girl in August. She said the baby was premature. Can an 8 1/2-pound baby be this premature? — Wanting to Know

Dear Wanting: The baby was on time. The wedding was late. Forget it.

Mrs. Phillips was also keen, genteelly, to keep pace with the times. In 1976, she confided to *People* magazine that she had recently seen an X-rated movie. Her sister, she learned afterward, had wanted to see it, too, but feared being recognized.

“How did you get away with it?” Ann Landers asked Dear Abby.

“Well,” Dear Abby replied breezily, “I just put on my dark glasses and my Ann Landers wig and went!”

The youngest of four sisters, Pauline Esther Friedman, familiarly known as Popo, was born in Sioux City, Iowa, on July 4, 1918. Her twin, Esther Pauline (known as Eppie), beat her into the

world by 17 minutes, just as she would narrowly beat her into the advice business.

Their father, Abraham, was a Jewish immigrant from Vladivostok, Russia, who had made his start in the United States as an itinerant chicken peddler and, in an archetypal American success story, ended up owning a chain of movie theaters.

The twins attended Morningside College in Sioux City, where they both studied journalism and psychology and wrote a joint gossip column for the school paper.

As close as they were, the intense competitiveness that would later spill into the public arena was already apparent. “She wanted to be the first violin in the school orchestra, but I was,” Mrs. Phillips told *Life* magazine in 1958. “She swore she’d marry a millionaire, but I did.”

In 1939, Pauline Friedman left college to marry Morton Phillips, an heir to a liquor fortune. She was married in a lavish double ceremony alongside Eppie, who, not to be outdone, was wed on the same day to Jules Lederer, a salesman who later founded the Budget Rent A Car corporation.

As a young bride, Mrs. Phillips lived in Eau Claire, Wis., where her husband was an executive with the National Pressure Cooker Company, which his family had acquired.

“It never *occurred* to me that I’d have any kind of career,” Mrs. Phillips told *The Los Angeles Times* in 1986. “But after I was married, I thought, ‘There has to be something more to life than mah-jongg.’”

She took up civic work training hospital volunteers, an experience that helped lay the foundation for her future calling. “I learned how to listen,” Mrs. Phillips told *The San Diego Union-Tribune* in 1989. “Sometimes, when people come to you with a problem, the best thing you can do is listen.”

In 1955, Mrs. Phillips’s twin, now Eppie Lederer, took over the Ann Landers column for *The Chicago Sun-Times*. A rank beginner soon swamped by a flood of mail, she began sending batches of letters to her sister — for advice, as it were.

“I provided the sharp answers,” Mrs. Phillips told *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1981. “I’d say, ‘You’re writing too long (she still does), and this is the way I’d say it.’” She added, “My stuff was published — and it looked awfully good in print.”

So good that when *The Sun-Times* later forbade Mrs. Lederer to send letters out of the office, Mrs. Phillips, by this time living in the Bay Area, vowed to find a column of her own.

She phoned *The San Francisco Chronicle*, identifying herself as a local housewife who thought she could do better than the advice columnist the paper already had. “If you’re ever in the neighborhood,” the features editor said rhetorically, “come in and see me.”

Mrs. Phillips took him at his word and the next morning appeared unannounced in the newsroom in a Dior dress. She prudently left her chauffeured Cadillac around the corner.

If only to get rid of her, the editor handed her a stack of back issues, telling her to compose her own replies to the letters in the advice column. She did so in characteristic style and dropped off her answers at the paper. She arrived home to a ringing telephone. The job was hers — at \$20 a week.

Mrs. Phillips chose her pen name herself, taking Abigail after the prophetess in the Book of Samuel (“Then David said to Abigail ‘Blessed is your advice and blessed are you’”) and Van Buren for its old-family, presidential ring. Her first column appeared on Jan. 9, 1956, less than three months after her sister’s debut.

An immediate success, the column was quickly syndicated. But with Mrs. Phillips’s growing renown came a growing estrangement from her twin, as Dear Abby and Ann Landers battled each other in syndication. According to many accounts, the sisters did not speak for five years, reconciling only in the mid-1960s.

Mrs. Lederer died in 2002, at 83. In addition to her daughter, Jeanne, Mrs. Phillips is survived by her husband of 73 years, Mort Phillips; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A son, Edward, died in 2011 at 66.

Her columns have been collected in several book-length anthologies, including “Dear Abby on Marriage” (1962) and “The Best of Dear Abby” (1981). From 1963 to 1975, Mrs. Phillips also had a daily “Dear Abby” program on CBS Radio.

In 1982, in a rare professional misstep, Mrs. Phillips acknowledged that she had recycled old letters for use in contemporary columns. (In the kind of parallel experience that seemed to define their lives together, Mrs. Lederer acknowledged earlier that year that she had run recycled letters in Ann Landers’s column.)

But until her retirement in 2000, Mrs. Phillips remained a trusted adviser in a world that had evolved from discussions of the dainty art of naked bacon-frying to all manner of postmodern angst:

Dear Abby: Two men who claim to be father and adopted son just bought an old mansion across the street and fixed it up. We notice a very suspicious mixture of company coming and going at all hours — blacks, whites, Orientals, women who look like men and men who look like women. This has always been considered one of the finest sections of San Francisco, and these weirdos are giving it a bad name. How can we improve the neighborhood? — Nob Hill Residents

Dear Residents: You could move.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 17, 2013

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated the day Mrs. Phillips died. It was Wednesday, not Thursday.