

Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**"My mother
didn't raise
me to be a quitter."**

--Alice Marble



Alice Marble, 1937, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Note: Readers often ask how I find my stories. Sometimes, it's because someone has sent me a suggestion. At other times, when I'm researching one woman, I come across another trailblazer whose story I want to share. That's what happened with last month's issue about Althea Gibson: I learned about Alice Marble. Hope you enjoy!

Swat Queen: Alice Marble

As a young woman in the 1930s and 1940s, [Alice Marble](#) rose from what she called the "pinch" of poverty to become an international athlete, author, activist, and spy. She helped to integrate the game of tennis, made athletic wear for women fashionable, and later coached the future greats of tennis, including [Billy Jean King](#). She even had a minor [role](#) in a movie starring Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn.

[Born](#) in 1913 in the rural town of Beckwith, California, Marble's father died seven years later, leaving his wife with five young children to support. The family had recently moved to San Francisco for higher-paying jobs, but without their father, Marble's older siblings had to drop out of school to help pay the bills.

In [Courting Danger](#), an autobiography published posthumously in 1991, Marble [recalled](#): "...I felt the pinch of being poor...[and] was glad I was too young to quit school and work.

Once I learned to read, I discovered that I could remember almost everything I read, word for word...I was gifted with a photographic memory..."

When Marble was thirteen, she and her brother attended a Seals game, a minor league baseball team in San Francisco. Marble became obsessed with the sport, and she and her brother would go every day to watch the team practice. One time, the pair took their mitts to play catch while the Seals warmed up. According to Marble, Lefty O'Doul mistook her for a boy and invited her onto the field. She [wrote](#): "Before he could change his mind, I scaled the fence, I ran onto the field, and began to play catch with him...my hero, Lefty O'Doul, asked me to shag flies for him. Joe DiMaggio, beside me in center field, yelled encouragement." That day, Marble became the team's official mascot.

In high school, the athletic Marble lettered in softball, basketball, and track, but at 5'7" and 150 pounds, she was "painfully self-conscious...only when I was playing sports did I feel confident." Worried about his sister's tomboy image, her brother gave her a tennis racket, although, in that era, tennis was a sport of the wealthy. Lessons, equipment, and access to courts were expensive. But within a week, Marble was hooked. She began hanging out at public courts to learn the game. She later reflected that it made her an aggressive and scrappy competitor.

Marble's lack of self-esteem was compounded when, at age fifteen, she was [raped](#). The emotional trauma haunted her, but the resilient Marble later said that the experience strengthened her will to live life on her own terms.



Alice Marble, 1939, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

In high school, she began winning local and regional tournaments. By the time she was nineteen, she knew that she needed a professional coach. Marble postponed college to work. Her goal was to save enough money to hire [Eleanor Tennant](#), California's top-ranked player. In a twist of fate, Tennant attended one of Marble's matches and reached out to Marble first. They struck an arrangement wherein Marble would spend a month with Tennant several times a year in exchange for helping with other students at exclusive resorts in La Jolla and Beverly Hills.

But it wasn't what Marble had envisioned, and once again, she had hurdles to overcome. Tennant took [control](#) of Marble's life, including her finances, clothing, and friends. On the court, Marble had to unlearn everything she knew. Marble doubled down and working with Tennant paid off.

Shedding her image as a tough, uneducated kid, Marble embraced her strengths. She used her athleticism to play tennis like men did. Rather than standing at the back and waiting for the ball, she would run to the net to return the ball in rapid volleys. It earned her the [nickname](#) "Queen of the Swat."

Other nicknames followed, including Alice Marvel and the Garbo of Tennis. Having shed her self-consciousness and embraced her own beauty, in 1932, she boldly [walked](#) onto the court in white shorts instead of the long, cumbersome skirts that were standard dress for female players. It shocked some fans, but soon, other players followed her example.

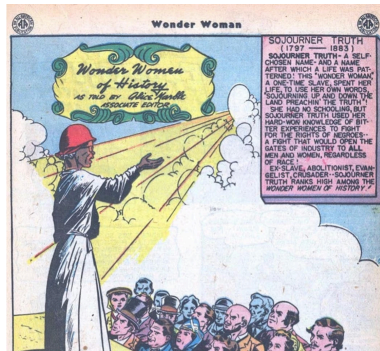
Marble developed her own line of clothing and turned athletic wear for women into a fashion statement. Befriending many celebrities, including Carole Lombard and Clark Gable, Marble became what today we would call an influencer.

In 1933, Marble earned recognition as the 10th-ranked player in the world, but she then suffered a significant setback. Playing an astounding 108 games on a 100-degree day, she collapsed from heatstroke, cutting her playing season short. The following spring, she competed in Paris, but again collapsed during play. This time, she was diagnosed with anemia and pleurisy. Everyone thought Marble's career was finished, but two years later, she returned stronger than before.



DC Comics

Marble's comeback in 1936 is regarded by many as one of the sport's greatest moments. Between 1936 and 1941, she won eighteen Grand Slam titles and was the world's number one-ranked player. This time, World War II ended Marble's career, but she turned pro and played celebrity matches to entertain the troops. She also promoted war bonds.



DC Comics

Marble joined DC Comics in 1941 as an associate editor. She wrote stories for the *Wonder Woman* comics series and [created](#) "Wonder Women of History" to tell the stories of remarkable women whose achievements had been overlooked.

It was also during the war that Marble claims to have married a fighter pilot in 1942. In [Courting Danger](#), she writes that his plane was shot down in 1944, three days after she suffered a miscarriage. Distraught, Marble attempted suicide but then found her will to live. "My mother didn't raise me to be a quitter," she wrote. Soon after, she was [recruited](#) by the U.S. government to work as a spy.

As a star athlete, Marble was able to travel abroad to play celebrity matches. It provided the perfect cover, and with her photographic memory, she seemed like a natural fit.

Marble's first [assignment](#) was to seduce a former lover, a Swiss banker with financial ties to the Nazi regime. She writes that the mission was going well until she accidentally left a light on in her lover's house, and was discovered. Trying to escape, she stole his car, and a chase ensued through the streets of Geneva, in which she was shot in the back. Her next memory was waking up in a Swiss hospital without any clue as to how she had arrived there. American agents succeeded in getting her out of Switzerland.

In a 2023 [interview](#) with *Next Avenue*, journalist and biographer [Madeleine Blais](#), author of *Queen of the Court: The Many Lives of Tennis Legend Alice Marble*, stated that no one has ever been able to verify the facts of Marble's story. Blais believes that Marble fabricated the story about her marriage and espionage, perhaps in an effort to regain her star power, which had begun to fade.

Regardless, there is no dispute that after the war, Marble [worked](#) to integrate the sport of tennis. In 1950, when African American [Althea Gibson](#) attempted to cross racial lines to play at the U.S. Nationals (now the U.S. Open), Marble rallied to her side.



Alice Marble and Althea Gibson

In an article for *American Lawn Tennis* in July 1950, Marble [wrote](#): "If tennis is a game for ladies and gentlemen, it's also time we acted a little more like gentle people and less like sanctimonious hypocrites..." She continued that if Gibson were denied the chance to compete, "...there is an ineradicable mark against a game to which I have devoted most of my life, and I would be bitterly ashamed." One month later, Gibson became the [first](#) African American to walk onto court at the U.S. Nationals.

In 1964, Marble was [inducted](#) into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. She moved to Palm Desert, California, where she coached and mentored many future champions, [including](#) Billie Jean King.

Marble died in 1990 at age seventy-seven. Remembering her famous coach, King [remarked](#) to a *New York Times* reporter: "Alice Marble was a picture of unrestrained athleticism. She is remembered as one of the greatest women to play the game because of her pioneering style in power tennis. I admired her tremendously because she always helped others."

As a tribute, the City of San Francisco [named](#) the courts at the top of Russian Hill, the Alice Marble Tennis Courts. According to [IMDb](#), the Internet Movie Database, a film about Marble is in development based on *Courting Danger*, co-authored by Dale Leatherman.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: What does it mean to live life on your own terms?

Ask a friend: Have you ever invented a story about your bravery and courage?

What I'm reading: [Margaret Grace Myer's](#), *The Fight For Sex Ed: The Century Long Battle between Truth and Doctrine*. One reviewer [wrote](#): "a well-researched and eye-opening history of the century-long struggle over sex education in America... [it]...traces how science, politics, religion, and cultural values have collided in classrooms..." Stay tuned!

I specialize in the life and times of reproductive rights activist, Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). In 2020, [Time](#) magazine included her among the nine most important women in American history. I curate Dennett's family archive, and am at work on a novel about her life. In 2024, my manuscript was named runner-up in [Book Pipeline's General Fiction category](#).



My essays have been published in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. I live in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City with my husband and black lab, Hank.

If your business, book club, school, church, or social group needs a speaker, [reach out](#). My passion is sharing the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century.

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