

mer breaks as a student.

Breckinridge, a descendant of U.S. Vice President John C. Breckinridge, knew philanthropic individuals from all over the world, and many visited the FNS. She also brought nurses to Kentucky, a lot of them coming from England. Whitcomb first heard opera at Wendover, the FNS headquarters, because the British nurses would play their records. "It was almost like a cultural enclave dropped in the middle of southeastern Kentucky. My mother would make cakes and take them up to tea and there would be people from all over the world there. They would talk about the most marvelous adventures of travel and fighting disease around the world. It just opened my mind.

"Tea at four, sherry at five, and dinner at six," said Whitcomb. "Very British . . . a little silver bell would ring and then servers would bring in the new biscuits. It was a British enclave in Leslie County."

Whitcomb remembers overhearing a conversation between two women talking about flying airplanes when she was a junior courier. "Two women! They talked about flying in here (Kentucky) and flying in Africa. This stuck in my mind that *women* can fly airplanes," said Whitcomb.

Later, while living in Washington, D.C., Whitcomb obtained her own pilot's license.

### Getting Started

At UK, Whitcomb majored in zoology, minored in chemistry, and obtained her secondary school teaching certificate. But she briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a banjo player during her junior year when a friend taught Whitcomb how to play a song learned from the legendary J.D. Crowe. On Thursday nights, Whitcomb and friends would congregate at a Lexington establishment to hear Crowe play. One night Crowe let her play "*Cripple Creek*" on his banjo in the back room. She did pretty well until she realized she didn't know how to end the piece. After that, Whitcomb took a fancy to the banjo and told her mother she wanted to take a semester off and be an apprentice banjo picker with J.D. Crowe.

"My banjo career lasted about as long as it took my mother to inflate her

lungs to speak to me," chuckled Whitcomb. "So Crowe never knew of my musical aspirations."

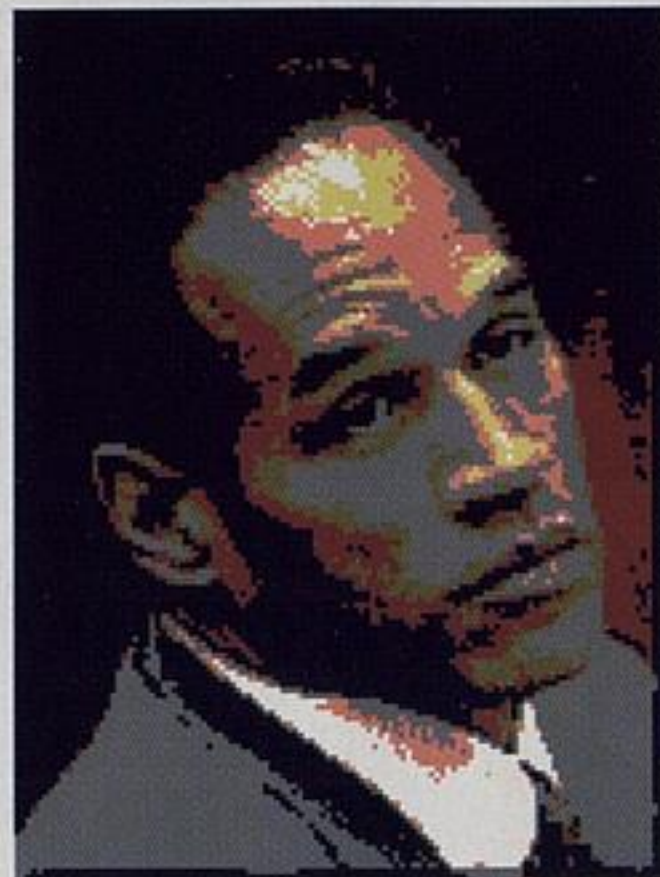
Whitcomb's first teaching job after UK was a half-year assignment at a middle school in Lexington. Family obligations took her to Alabama, where she landed a job as a science and chemistry teacher. But money was tight and Whitcomb learned she could earn more working nearby for the Alabama Department of Toxicology and Criminal Investigation. She applied for the job and was hired, she believes, because of her familiarity with the equipment being used in the Alabama lab.

"The instruments they were using for blood alcohol and drug analysis in the toxicology section of the laboratory were the same instruments I had used at UK in the chemistry laboratory. And no doubt, it was my familiarity of the instruments that put me ahead of other applicants," said Whitcomb.

Whitcomb started on the ground floor in that Alabama forensic science laboratory. Several family moves put her in Washington, D.C., where she obtained a master's degree in forensic science in 1976 at George Washington University.

### Examining Evidence for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service

She was then hired by the U.S. Postal Service's Headquarters Laboratory as a forensic chemist associate. Whitcomb worked her way up through the ranks of the Postal Inspection Service to become the first female director of the headquarters laboratory. Later, when the Postal Inspection Service laboratories were undergoing an accreditation process, she took on the role of manager-forensic services, for five laboratories across the nation: Chicago, New York, Memphis, and San Francisco, along with the Washington, D.C., lab.



## WHITCOMB AGREED THAT THE O.J. SIMPSON TRIAL MIGHT HAVE SERVED AS A PRIMER FOR HOW NOT TO COLLECT EVIDENCE.

Once the evidence is collected, bagged, tagged, and properly stored, it's sent to the laboratory.

"Forensic means debate," said Whitcomb. "And forensic science is debate of science in the arena of the court."

Whitcomb agreed that the O.J. Simpson trial might have served as a primer for how *not* to collect evidence. "They say that out of every tragedy some good comes," said Whitcomb. "It has really helped crime labs to get funding for improvements."

### Mail Bombs

It's not unusual for crime labs to work with each other, and Whitcomb worked with the FBI during the early days of what some might consider the most famous mail bomb case in recent history — the Unabomber. She was being trained when one of the first Unabomber devices was submitted to the laboratory for analysis. It had been sent through the mail, so it fell under the Postal Service jurisdiction. It was one of two such devices in the lab and

The Postal Inspection Service, founded by Benjamin Franklin, is one of the oldest federal law enforcement agencies. The agency helps to fight criminals who attempt to attack the postal system or use it to defraud, endanger or threaten the public. Forensic scientists and technical specialists assist postal inspectors by analyzing material to identify and trace suspects. They also provide expert testimony if a case goes to trial.

Collecting evidence properly is very important, Whitcomb said. It must be collected so that it is not contaminated, is labeled properly, and there must be a proper chain of custody.

Lots of photographs are taken at the scene of a crime because one must be able to extrapolate back to where each piece of evidence was found.