What Ever Happened To...Eileen Feather?

There is a special place in American history for Jack and Eileen Feather, who along with their two sons are the sole owners and proprietors of Cambridge Plan International (i.e., Cambridge Diet).

Jack Feather was determined to fight his way out of his partial paralysis. He said he sent his wife to buy dime store balloons; sitting in his bed, he would blow them up and then resist the air blowing back into his mouth. He would lift a weight with his good arm and then try to lower it to the floor with his slowly recovering bad arm. His body came back, but not his voice--he still talked in a hoarse half-whisper. Jack Feather borrowed $5,000 from his father-in-law and opened the small Berkeley gymnasium that in seven years turned into the Eileen Feather Reducing Salons.

Figure salons were the sort of business the 1950s might have been invented for; chains were opening nationwide, Jack La Lanne was on television exhorting women into smaller waists and flatter stomachs, and in the newspaper advertisements Eileen Feather displayed her personal attributes in tight sweaters and stretch pants. The Feathers bought an airplane and flew it from salon to salon. And when the ladies began complaining that they were losing weight even where they did not wish to lose weight, Jack Feather designed a small, hand-operated piece of exercise equipment that he named, with no evident sense of irony, after Jack London's fictional character Martin Eden.

Jack and Eileen Feather later discovered Cambridge. The story of the diet is told at length in the voluminous publicity materials that arrive with the newcomer's introduction to The Cambridge Plan; in the brochure is a picture of Eileen Feather standing with Dr. Alan Howard. When Jack Feather read published reports of Howard's experimental work with very low calorie diets, Feather visited Cambridge and obtained the US and Canadian patent rights to Howard's formula.

Nobody, not even Eileen Feather, was prepared for what happened. In February 1981, 25 "counselors" were selling the Cambridge Diet at the rate of one can per customer per week (the counselor bought each can for $11.67 and sold it for about $18). By mid-1982, there were 150,000 counselors, and the company's yearly gross was approaching half a billion dollars. Eventually, though, the company faltered badly. Vaughn Feather said competition and a collapsing counselor system were crippling them. Still, when both Jack and Eileen passed away in 2017, they left behind a 37 million dollar estate.