

JOANNE WALLACE ORR, NOVEMBER 7, 1920 – OCTOBER 10, 2006

WWII AVIATRIX AND FORMER FIRST LADY OF INDIANA

Joanne Wallace Orr, the former First Lady of Indiana, whose dashing youth as a polo player, operetta singer, race car driver and daredevil military pilot during WWII went on to share the spotlight with her former husband, Robert D. Orr, who was Governor of Indiana and then Ambassador to Singapore, died October 10, 2006 following a brief illness at St. Vincent Hospice in Indianapolis. She was 85.

Joanne Wallace was born in 1920 in Springfield, Massachusetts, and went by Jo during her childhood, and then Josie all her adult life. Her father Norman Wallace co-owned Forbes & Wallace, Springfield's flagship department store. "My grandfather Andrew Bradner Wallace came from Aberdeen, Scotland and established the firm that is now more than 110 years old," Mrs. Orr wrote in the early 1980s. "People came from all other the nation to shop, even from Honolulu." Jo grew up at *Scotsmore*, the family's Longmeadow home where she no doubt absorbed decorating skills from her gifted mother, the former Marjorie Robbins, whose gimlet eye assembled a splendid and gracious home and gardens from pieces meticulously collected throughout Europe. The garage had a giant turntable that allowed five cars to be secreted away in very little space. Her mother's uncle, Morris B. Robbins, was under secretary of the treasury under President Eisenhower.

From her early childhood Jo was an avid equestrian and lover of horses. "My uncle had polo ponies. I was always out in the open with horses, and I didn't know how to relate to people," she once explained. She started her own polo team and once stowed away in a boxcar *with her horse* to run away from a Quaker boarding school in Maine to return home. This was as good example as any of her lifelong persistence in "doing it her way," a credo from which she never wavered. She attended McDuffy School for Girls for eight years. "Martha Graham came there to teach ballet, and I loved that," she said. "Then I went to a small school in Great Barrington, Massachusetts where there were just six in each class. I was given a singing role in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, and I learned to come out of my shell. When I graduated from high school, I spent a year as a debutante in Boston and New York City. That's when I met Bob Orr. He was a friend of my brother (Lawrence R. Wallace) at The Hotchkiss School. I learned he was from Indiana, that he was going to Yale – and he made a big impression on me." Jo went on to attend Finch Junior College in New York City, where she studied home economics, sewed leather gloves and designed dresses. She attended secretarial school and worked as a nurse's aid in Springfield, Massachusetts hospitals, where she had a "crush" on a stunt pilot. At the advent of WWII she enlisted in the military with the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). She rose to Squadron Commander of her Air Force class.

"The war was on, and I heard about the WASP," she exhorted. "I took off! I went to Avenger Field, Sweetwater, TX, began the regular Army

Air Corps training. We flew bombers, cargo and pursuit planes all over the U.S. and Canada."

General "Hap" Arnold attended Jo's class graduation following flight training to show his support for the wartime efforts of women. "Our graduation was the only one he attended, so it was a thrilling occasion," she remembered. When it came time to pin on the wings, General Arnold unbuttoned the top button of the uniform jacket, as he always had, to place the prongs on the back of the wings. "I was the first one up. He unbuttoned the top of my jacket, put his hand in ... and all of a sudden turned beet red," Jo laughed. "He was so embarrassed that everyone else was handed their wings."



WASP Portrait, WWII.

The WASP ferried warplanes from factories to airfields, and returned battlefield crippled planes for repairs. In this role, she soloed every type of aircraft, especially those "so crippled that men refused to fly them," before her honorable discharge on December 4, 1944 at Randolph,

Texas. She maintained a commercial pilot license with a multi-engine unlimited horsepower rating through the 1980s.

Ten days after her discharge from the Army, she and Bob Orr were married in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. "We were married in the Congregational Church and pipers were engaged to come after the ceremony to play on a special church bell cue. But they missed the cue and came in piping only to collide with the newlyweds. We were still marching down the aisle to the dum-dum-de-dum of the wedding march." The newlyweds set up temporary and colorful residence in Washington, DC for two years while the bridegroom served in the Quartermaster corps.

"Then Bob began a job hunting tour of the United States. While we were courting, he said we'd never live in Evansville (where Mr. Orr was a sixth generation native), but he stopped off there for a visit with his parents. He visited the family business, the Orr Iron Company, a wholesale hardware and steel firm. He found that the youngest employee was about 60, and the firm had a big inventory of horseshoes and wagon wheels. Bob's business imagination went wild, and he phoned me to ask what I would think of moving to Evansville. I told him, 'Fine.' But I asked him to find a house in the country. I was three months pregnant."

Mr. Orr bought a house sight unseen and when Mrs. Orr flew to Evansville she found the house needed many repairs before they could move in. They enlarged the house three times, raised boxer dogs and had a milk punch party every

fall. She may best be remembered for her famous Circus Party, a gargantuan costume affair attended by 2,000 people. She set up food stands, brought in elephants and obtained a merry-go-round and 45 acts.

"Another party was a black and white party for which we brought in a collection of bird cages and rented tropical birds," she said. "I'll never do that again! But the black and white party surpassed the one Truman Capote had."

"I wanted to garden, so I went to some experienced gardeners and they gave me excellent advice. In three months I had a garden copied from an English block print – one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. I used border flowers and graduating heights all in yellow, blue and white – English daisies and all sorts of flowers which bloomed constantly."

While in Evansville, Mrs. Orr organized a chapter of Planned Parenthood and was their first president. She piled up countless volunteer hours in Meals on Wheels, the Junior League, Red Cross, historic preservation, the board of the philharmonic, promoting the arts and organizing the McCutchanville Garden Club.

The Evansville years also saw her raise three children. Mrs. Orr participated in her children's activities and was once a den mother for a Cub Scout group. "When the children were older, we sent them to boarding schools," she said, "so they didn't get a deep involvement with Indiana." Always a lover of daring, she made a grand tour with her two daughters to ride the most notorious rollercoasters around the country. While driving through Kansas she suddenly observed one of the worst tornados on record twisting her way. She paused momentarily to take stock of all manner of life scurrying for cover. Then, evincing less trepidation than Moses at the portentous tempest that harassed entry to the parting Red Sea, she gleefully remarked to her white knuckled children, "Wow, now we can finally make good time," and floored the accelerator to rocket through the newly vacated thoroughfare, still locked in the funnel's mayhem.

In the mid-70s, with all the children "out of the nest" and starting their own families, Mr. Orr changed careers from business to politics and the couple moved to Indianapolis. Mr. Orr, a Republican, won elections as State Senator for one term, then as Lt. Governor for two terms and finally as Governor for two terms (1981-89) during the Reagan years.

When Mr. Orr became Lt. Governor Mrs. Orr took one look at her husband's office's neon lights and bare walls and took on a restoration project. She used portraits of Indiana governors found in the Statehouse attic, paintings typical of the Victorian period loaned from the Indianapolis Museum of Art, judges' chairs and a desk and matching console from Indiana National Bank's former quarters at 3 Virginia Avenue. "I made it possible for the bank to put the furniture in the Statehouse instead of storage," she said. "A fire

rail, a feinting couch drafted in Indiana and a pair of Staffordshire dogs for the mantelpiece were among other finds here and there," she said.

When Orr defeated John A. Hillenbrand II in the 1980 election for governor, Mrs. Orr tackled other projects. At the official executive residence, she decided to establish a Hoosier-oriented library and arrange for construction of a distinctive gazebo in the spacious yard on Meridian Street. "Pamela Bennett, director of the Indiana Historical Bureau, assisted me in forming a library committee," Mrs. Orr said at the time. "We already have collected a good many volumes by Hoosier authors and are searching for others. They all are catalogued, and we want visitors who browse in the library to be aware of Indiana's rich cultural heritage." For the rest of Governor's Residence, "I wanted to open it up," Mrs. Orr explained. "I wanted it to be beautiful from the very first glance. The people of Indiana appreciate quality and good taste." No tax dollars were involved in refurbishing. There were gifts, bequests and distinctive furnishings, paintings and handcrafted accessories provided by thoughtful people. New York designer Mark Hampton, a Plainfield, Indiana native, assisted Mrs. Orr in initial planning stages of remodeling the residence. He suggested the colorful chintz fabric on the sofa and love seat in the living room and aided in selecting other fabrics and furnishings. The focal point in the large room was the intricately hand painted Steinway piano, which carries a marketing name of Gaeolean. The piano, originally a player, was purchased about 1933 by the J.H. Trimbles for their home at 4343 North Meridian Street, later the Governor's Residence from 1945 to 1973. William Forsyth's painting, "Day Dreaming," hung above the fireplace, and "The Village Rider," painted in Nantucket in 1922, was center stage above the sofas.

In the dining room the Sheraton cherry table and sideboard set the scene for luncheons and dinners, and a Lalique crystal chandelier added richness. The breakfast room featured tulip tree leaf design in needlepoint on the seats of cane-back chairs. Custom made carpeting to match was acquired several years earlier when northern Indiana needlepoint experts completed work on the chair seats. Did the Orrs ever get to have dinner alone? "Never!" the First Lady said. "Occasionally on Sunday mornings we slept late and had breakfast together." Mrs. Orr is known for her gourmet cooking, and she wrote a cook-



First Lady Portrait, 1981-88

book with Mary Fortune. She said she enjoyed the coming and going of people, especially visits of pupils from the Indiana Schools for the Blind and Deaf. "We took time to let the blind children feel the lovely things they wanted to see, and the deaf children asked questions and had fun and laughed when signers answered," she said.

Mrs. Orr chose bright blue and ivory patio furniture for the sun porch from which visitors could view the expansive south lawn. Upstairs guest rooms had a Far East theme. Mrs. Orr added a semicircular glass inset above the stained glass window in the north entrance of the Governor's Residence. A nine by nine wall hanging for the foyer, made by Hoosier craftsmen, depicts the five governor's residences. Mrs. Orr planned a greenhouse, and named a planning committee to stock the wine cellar.

The gazebo probably attracted more attention than any other innovation at the residence. "I don't mind if people laugh when they see the wrought-iron gazebo," she said. "That's why I put it there - to make people happy. You'd never believe the attention it gets! We change the decorations with each season. There are potted plants throughout the summer, turkeys for Thanksgiving, twinkling lights and evergreens for Christmas - and sometimes we add animals and birds from the zoo. People have picnics by the gazebo. There have been two weddings there. Many people come on the grounds just to look at the 12-foot circular structure, and recently a woman came to the door with a bottle of champagne and asked if I would join her in a toast to the gazebo. I appreciated her thoughtfulness, but I had guests."

The gazebo was commissioned from Gilpin Ornamental Iron Co. at a cost of about \$4,000, all paid for by donations. The first guests to have an official look at the lawn attraction were members of the prestigious Kenmore Association for which Mrs. Orr serves on the Board of Regents. The association is dedicated to preservation of the Fredericksburg, Virginia, home built in 1782 by Fielding Lewis for his wife, Betty, George Washington's only sister.

When Mr. Orr was appointed Ambassador to Singapore (1989-91), Mrs. Orr redecorated the US Ambassadors Residence in Singapore, again with gifts and donations she raised. While in Singapore she came across the enormous sterling silver bowl commemorating the warship US Indiana, which she promptly ordered returned to the State of Indiana. Unfortunately, the bowl belonged to the US Navy, whose permission was never sought, leading to yet another chapter in her colorful controversy.

After 56 years of marriage, the Orrs were divorced in 2000. Mr. Orr passed away March 10, 2004.

Throughout her political and diplomatic careers, Mrs. Orr raised awareness, attention and funding for the visual and performing arts in Indiana and

elsewhere. She took a leading role in starting the Indiana Arts Commission. Never satisfied to leave well-enough alone, she constantly labored to improve the visual and auditory world around her for the enjoyment of others as well as herself, right down to her last tiny apartment in assisted living at Marquette Manor.

A member of the First Presbyterian Church of Indiana, Mrs. Orr was very active in a long list of community affairs for which she received an Honorary Degree from the University of Southern Indiana, the Sagamore of the Wabash award, and a State of Indiana, Honorary Teacher's License for K-12. She served on numerous Boards and was otherwise involved, including as Kenmore Association Regent, the Indianapolis Symphony Society, the Ballet Internationale, the Indianapolis Opera, the Indianapolis Zoo, the Decorative Arts Society and Trust, the Eiteljorg Museum, the Children's Museum, the Alliance of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Rug and Textile Society, the Asian Art Society, the IMA & Horticultural Society, the Children's Zoo, People of Vision, the Family Support Center Auxiliary, the Theatre Arts Guild, The State Assembly Women's Club, Clowes Hall Women's Committee, Traders Point Hunt Club, the Hoosier Salon Guild, the University of Southern Indiana, the Festival Music Society, the Fine Arts Society, the Historical Landmarks Foundation, the Museum of Miniature Houses, the National Museum of women in the Arts, the Indianapolis Historical Society, the Indianapolis Repertory Theater, the Indiana State Museum, the Indianapolis Art Center, the Indianapolis Civic Theater, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Colonial Dames, the Meridian Hill Country Club, and the Woodstock Club.

On Tuesday, October 10, 2006 Mrs. Orr died peacefully as bagpipes trumpeted her transition in the manner to which she was accustomed. She is survived by her sister, Marjorie Wallace Pierce of Brewster, Massachusetts, her son Robert D. Orr, Jr. an architect of New Haven, Connecticut, her daughters Susan Orr Jones and Robbins Orr Hail both organic growers of Osceola, Missouri, 8 grand children and 4 great-grand children.

There was no funeral, but a memorial service is planned for May 25, 2007 at the Indianapolis Zoo.

Upon her passing, current Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, who described the former First Lady as "one of a kind" in a written statement, ordered flags to be flown at half-mast in her honor throughout the state.

Those wishing to make donations in her honor are urged to contribute to The Joanne W. Orr Charitable Fund, c/o The Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF), 615 North Adams Street, Suite 119, Indianapolis, IN 46204. The Fund supports her favorite charities.