

ELIZABETH 'LIBBIE' FAULKNER NOLAN • JANUARY 10, 1917 — OCTOBER 20, 2019

Author, historian Libbie Nolan dies at 102

Family, art, county history at center of long life

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TOWN OF VERNON — For Elizabeth “Libbie” Nolan, family and history not only inter-

sected, they ran parallel paths through her life for more than a century, with her work informing her descendants, her neighbors and their descendants for generations to come.

Nolan, a former editor for

both The Freeman and Landmark, the magazine of the Waukesha County Historical Society, and a mainstay of local history, passed away of natural causes Sunday. She was 102.

Nolan, who was born in the

Theodora Winton House on Prospect Hill in New Berlin, grew up on a Vernon farm named Bonniedale for its picturesque landscape during the Depression, being friends with future Gov. Julius Heil and attending a one-room school

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Libbie Nolan, a prolific writer of county history as well as artist and poet, former Freeman employee and longtime editor of Landmark Magazine, died Sunday at age 102.

Submitted photo

Nolan

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with eventual Congressman Glenn Davis. She later worked as a coal miner, and then wound motors for the war effort at Allis-Chalmers where she met her husband, Frank. She displayed a passion for history and rural art, writing hundreds of articles about local affairs and history for The Freeman, Muskego Sun and decades as editor of Landmark. She was named to the World Who's Who of Women in 1973, and served on statewide artists and writers associations through the University of Wisconsin.

"That's part of the fun of my life, the history, so many different ways," she said on the eve of her 100th birthday in 2017.

Nolan was a proud member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, with a family history that goes at least as far back as Gideon King, who fought in the Revolutionary War's Battle of Lexington. Another ancestor of hers, Rufus Cheney, founded the Free Will Baptist Church in New Berlin; her parents and grandparents attended the church and when it closed Nolan found a

home at Vernon Presbyterian Church, which her great-grandfather Thomas Faulkner helped to organize.

During World War II, Nolan also recruited blood donors for the Waukesha Red Cross, offering a water color painting for each family that donated two or more pints of blood. She painted 23 pictures.

With her husband, they raised their family on Prospect Hill, making four generations of her family living there.

But Nolan also remained active with local historical causes. She helped to found four historical societies, in New Berlin, Muskego, Norway and Big Bend.

She was a former curator for the New Berlin Historical Society and the county historical society, writing articles for its Landmark Magazine for more than three decades. In 1956, Nolan suggested that the historical society place markers at significant spots around the county.

"They said, 'good idea. You should be the chair,'" Nolan told The Freeman in a 2004 interview.

And through the years, she kept writing — if not for The Freeman or the Muskego Sun, which she retired from,

or Landmark, her thoughts found their way into numerous paintings and books she wrote for family members, telling about herself, her childhood, her parents, and more. She also authored four historical books. The Waukesha County Historical Society created the Libbie Nolan Faulkner Award that is presented to promising historians each year.

"She was feisty," her daughter Betsey Bystol said. "She was driven. Very goal-oriented. A great sense of humor. She loved her kids, very supportive, just a total character."

"She was so proud of the heritage of Prospect Hill and the Vernon area because it was so much a part of her," Bystol said.

John Schoenknecht, who followed Nolan at Landmark, shared an anecdote about Nolan that exhibited her good humor as well as how seriously she took history.

"Libbie was the dean of Waukesha County history. She taught me about writing, about editing and about the art of assembling a magazine. Amazingly, she wrote a story for Landmark magazine at age 101," he said in an email. "Libbie started every phone call with 'Top o' the morning' (or evening or afternoon)."

"I was once 'scolded' by her when I used the word 'Fall' for the September issue of Landmark. 'We use 'Autumn,'" she chided. "It is more formal and descriptive."

Bystol said almost right up to the end Nolan was talking about writing a new Faulkner family feline book she wanted to write — a sequel to an earlier incarnation.

Nolan credited her longevity to a daily dose of oatmeal and fresh fruit and time spent exercising.

Bystol said her mother lived life "on her own terms, especially the last several years. My dad died in '87. So except for a short time that she was with a guy she went to high school with, she's

been alone and on her own.

"The amazing thing is she did all this writing legally blind. For the last 20 years she's had macular degeneration; she'd been legally blind. She could see out of one corner of one eye."

And yet, Nolan stayed at home until this summer, helped by very frequent visits from friends and daily visits from family.

Bystol said she spent much time editing and rewriting material with her mother; and whether it was family lineage or local county history, Nolan had similar reasons for doing it:

"If I don't, who will?" she said in 2004. "It is important to save our history. The world is moving so fast, if we don't save it, it will be lost."

Nolan is survived by children Denny Nolan and his wife Diana, Dr. Tim Nolan, Sandra Nolan, Betsey Nolan Bystol and her husband Ron, Pat Nolan and his wife, Janet; 10 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren.

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