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 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. 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 didn’t know how to relate to people,” 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 opera, 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 exhaled. “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."

The WASP ferried warplanes from factories to airfields, and returned battle-field 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 Air Force Base in Aberdeen, Scotland and established the firm that hand her a “crush” on a stunt pilot. At the advent of WWII she entered the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). She rose to Squadron Commander of her Air Force class.

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The WASP portrait, WWII.

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 tornadoes 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. “It made it possible for the bank to put the furniture in the Statehouse instead of storage,” she said. “A fire...
and had breakfast together.” Mrs. Orr is known to have dinner alone? “Never!” the First Lady said.

work on the chair seats. Did the Orrs ever get to northern Indiana needlepoint experts completed cane-back chairs. Custom made carpeting to place, and “The Village Rider,” painted in Nan
dence from 1945 to 1973. William Forsyth's North Meridian Street, later the Governor’s Resid
ners, and a Lalique crystal chandelier added bucket in 1922, was center stage above the sofas.

plain tux 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 Resi
dence from 1945 to 1973. William Forsyth’s painting, “Day Dreaming,” hung above the fire
place, and “The Village Rider,” painted in Nan
tucket in 1922, was center stage above the sofas.

In the dining room the Sheraton cherry table and sideboard set the scene for luncheons and din
ers, 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 Ors 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-
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 fur
niture 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 insert above the stained glass window in the north entrance of the Gover
nor'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 deco
rations with each season. There are potted plants throughout the summer, turkeys for Thanksgiving,
twinkling lights and evergreens for Christ
mas – and sometimes we add animals and birds from the zoo. People have picnics by the gazebo. There have been two weddings there. Many peo
ple 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 Or
namental 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 In
diana, which she promptly ordered returned to the State of Indiana. Unfortunately, the bowl be
longed 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 di

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 Li
cense for K–12. She served on numerous Boards and was otherwise involved, including as Ken
more Association Regent, the Indianapolis Sym
phony Society, the Ballet Internationale, the Indiana 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 As
dembly Women’s Club, Clowes Hall Women’s Committee, Traders Point Hunt Club, the Hoo
sier Salon Guild, the University of Southern In
diana, 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 Indiana
polis Art Center, the Indianapolis Civic Theater, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Co
lonial 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 Comm
unity Foundation (CICF), 615 North Adams Street, Suite 119, Indianapolis, IN 46204. The Fund supports her favorite charities.