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Marian Norby Dies; Feminist Activist

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Marian O. Norby, 85, a former writer and information officer for the Air Force and a veteran activist with feminist organizations, died of complications related to Parkinson's disease May 20 at Goodwin House in Alexandria.

Ms. Norby was a White House secretary during the administration of President Harry S. Truman, and she accompanied the president on his 1948 "Whistle Stop" campaign train across the United States, typing his speeches on a manual typewriter and using wax-coated stencils to produce multiple copies.

A gifted pianist, she played the keyboard into the early hours of the morning at the Muehlebach Hotel in Kansas City, where the president and his campaign staff gathered on election night to await the results of what would become his upset victory over New York Gov. Thomas E. Dewey. At the urging of Truman's friends, she played the "Missouri Waltz" over and over as the lead in the electoral college seasawed. Years later, she appeared in two film documentaries on the 1948 presidential election, including a PBS production on the 50th anniversary of that political contest.

Ms. Norby was a founding member of the D.C. chapter of the National Organization for Women, a campaigner for the Equal Rights Amendment, a charter member of the Older Women's League and a leader with the Woman's National Democratic Club. In 1999, a collection of women's rights activists honored her with a Veteran Feminist of America award.

A former Topeka, Kan., schoolteacher, she came to Washington as a tourist in the spring of 1941, and she ended up staying for more than 60 years. She was having dinner at a Hot Shoppes restaurant in this area when someone brought her a newspaper with columns of classified help-wanted ads. "That would have never happened in Kansas, where there were no jobs," Ms. Norby would recall years later.

With the help of friends, she found a room at a cockroach-infested boarding house and a \$25-a-week job as a federal secretary, becoming one of the many thousands of "government girls" who flocked to the nation's capital during World War II.

"If you could tell the difference between a typewriter and a washing machine, the government would hire you because they were so desperate for secretaries," she said.

Ms. Norby worked at first for the Library of Congress, then for the Foreign Economic Administration, one of many newly formed wartime government agencies.

It was during these experiences that the seeds of her feminist activism were sown. "I saw how women were treated," she said. "Secretaries were like furniture. They went with the office. The young men climbed the professional ladder and were hired as their bosses."

In those years, there were no orientation or training sessions for new secretaries, so Ms. Norby organized an ad hoc after-work training regimen that led to an officially sanctioned orientation program. Eventually, it led Ms. Norby to a job as a personnel officer, which she kept until the end of the war.

She worked at the White House until after the 1948 election, then took a job as an information officer and writer for the Air Force, which she kept until retiring in 1980. Throughout her federal career, she would agitate for equal job opportunities and promotions for federally employed women, and this activity would continue into her retirement.

Not only was she a charter member of the Older Women's League, but she insisted that her lawyer, John M. Powell, join the organization, which he did. She never stopped campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment, and as she aged she became increasingly active with the Gray Panthers and what is now AARP.

Ms. Norby was born in Cullison, Kan., where she grew up on a family farm. She attended Kansas State University.

She was a former choir member at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, and she played the piano regularly at parties and social gatherings.

After World War II, she was married briefly to John McCauley. The marriage ended in divorce.

She leaves no immediate survivors.

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