

Karen Lafky Nygaard, 1925-2011:

A Good and Gracious Person

BY LOYCE MARTINAZZI

In the early 1940's when I was a little kid and she was a teenager, Karen Lafky was my Sunday School teacher at the Community Methodist Church. Thus, with a fitting symbolism, our lifelong relationship as friends and colleagues in recording Tualatin's history began in the church building that has now become the Tualatin Heritage Center. I still remember Karen's kindness to me and my sister and how she encouraged us to sing in church when we were still shy young girls. Little did I know then how greatly she would affect my own life and the identity of our town.

Karen attended Lewis & Clark College, and then left Oregon for New York. It was during her summer visits during the 70s that we began an adult-to-adult friendship. She directed the church choir in which I sang. In addition to our love of music, Karen and I found we shared a passion for local history. We took long walks, sometimes down along the Tualatin River, talking about the old times, and the idea of starting a historical society in Tualatin began to take shape in our conversations. "Do you think we can really get it going?" I asked, and she assured me that yes, we could! And thus we began what was to be the pattern of our friendship: I had passion for Tualatin's history, and Karen with her capability and influence, made that passion take shape into something real.

So in 1986 we contacted many old timers still in the area and asked them to come to the senior center to start a historical society. Many were interested, and it wasn't long before we were having meetings, and gathering historical information and hundreds of vintage photographs.

In the fall of 1986 we began a series of Tualatin Historical Society programs

about such topics as Tualatin pioneers on the Oregon Trail, Tualatin before the white man, and early Tualatin schools. Budding social entrepreneurs, we charged \$3 admission—this price including historically relevant refreshments such as Indian flat bread, smoked salmon, hazel nuts, and tea steeped from local herbs. We were delighted when attendance at these programs on occasion reached over 100.



*Karen Lafky Nygaard,
1925-2011*

Almost all our specific projects in the early years of the historical society were Karen's idea, but with her confidence in me, and my admiration and respect for her, I developed into a good working partner for her. She instigated teas and tours of Tualatin's old buildings and sites, mini museums at the annual Tualatin Crawfish Festival, an elegant Diamond Jubilee Ball on Tualatin's 75th year of incorporation, Harvest Festivals, pie baking contests, talent shows, and barn dances. For several years, under Karen's leadership, the Tualatin Historical Society published calendars featuring vintage Tualatin photographs.

And always, in the back of our minds, was the idea that Tualatin's history should be permanently recorded. Through the years I had collected great piles of research about our area. I had a lot of stuff, and it just sat around in stacks in my office. Karen used to laugh and say I was an encyclopedia of Tualatin.

When Karen left for California to be with her new husband we started to work on "the book" even though we were separated by many miles. She systematically organized my research (something I was unable to do on my own), titled the chapters, and edited the chapters I composed on my electric typewriter and mailed off to her.

Our joint project became titled Tualatin...From the Beginning. It was a 196-page illustrated book, published in 1994, updated and re-printed in 2004. The success of our book paved the way for years of events and publications in which we educated Tualatin residents about the history of our town. We wrote and produced several plays about Tualatin's history, published many booklets, and produced a video together about the first 100 years of Tualatin. The publications are available for sale at the Tualatin Heritage Center and on loan from the public library.

In one of our many talks, Karen and I agreed that we could not separately have done what we did together. She changed my personal, professional, and creative life. Karen passed away from a rare form of liver cancer on October 6. In her obituary, I was listed as her colleague. A huge compliment to me, for if ever a good and gracious person walked along the Tualatin River, it was surely Karen Lafky Nygaard.



Karen, then known as Lois Lafky, sits on the end of the front row. Mr. Loose, principal, stands behind her.



The 1900 grade and high school was just north of the brick elementary school that was recently torn down. Karen graduated from 8th grade in this building, and graduated from Sherwood High School and Lewis and Clark College.



Karen grew up in this farmhouse with her parents Mark and Manette Lafky and her brother Herb. The Gieberger family, shown here, lived in the house previous to the Lafkys. The house was along Boones Ferry Road, south of the Byrom house. Part of the old farm is now Lafky Park.