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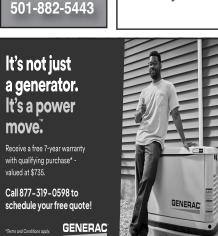
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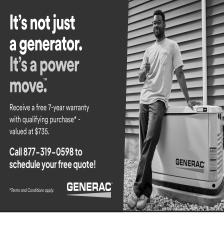




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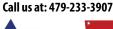
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# History Minute

Theodosia Nolan (Murphy Oil)

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society kbridges@southark.edu<mailto:kbridges@southark.edu>

The world is often fortunate enough to produce those great spirits who see beauty all around them and want to share it with the world. One of those figures, Theodosia Nolan, was the embodiment of southern style and grace in an age when that all too often seemed to be fading. But this underscored her thirst for adventure and it was her sharp business sense that prompted her to work with her brother and sisters to create a Fortune 500 com-

pany, Murphy Oil. Born Theodosia Murphy in El Dorado in 1917, she was the daughter of bank owner Charles H. Murphy, Sr. She grew up in the Oil Boom days in South Arkansas, when small farm and timber towns of the area exploded with throngs of prospectors, oilfield workers, and others determined to make a living from the black gold found deep under the

surface of South Arkansas. Though her only brother, Charles H. Murphy, Jr., was being groomed as a businessman, she worked hard to educate herself and entertain her taste for adventure. At the age of 16, in 1933, she learned to fly an airplane in a time before women were not even hired as commercial pilots. She was determined not to let social convention or nay-sayers constrain her. Taking "no" for an answer was something the family simply did not do. According to a family story, after graduating El Dorado High School, she decided to enroll at Mississippi's Gulf Park College for Women because she could fly her own plane there, parking it at a local airstrip while she attended classes. She also eventually attend the University of Texas at Austin. She married El Dorado businessman William C. Nolan in 1936, where the two would make a home in El Dorado for their 68 years of marriage together and eventually have four children.

In 1941, the family was devastated by the sudden death of Charles H. Murphy, Sr. This left the only brother, Charles, Jr., in charge of the family's many business interests at the age of 21. The family rallied and pulled together, and the Murphy business em-

pire continued to prosper under its second generation of leadership. In 1946, just after World War II, the 26-year-old Charles Murphy, Jr., came to the family with a radical plan: start a new oil company in El Dorado. The prospects seemed risky on the surface as other major oil companies continued to operate in South Arkansas, the nation's economy slowed as it returned to a peacetime economy, and the Oil Boom faded in the region. Additionally, the area's population had declined from the mid-1920s peak, and there were many powerful oil corporations on the national and world stage. Barely 29 years old herself, it was a daunting decision. Trusting her brother's skills and her own instincts, Theodosia Nolan decided to pool her money in and form the C. H. Murphy Co., which would later become Murphy Oil. In the end, the effort to create what would become one of the largest companies in the United States was led by a brother and sister who were not even 30 years old.

Murphy Oil would become a huge success, but none of this fazed Theodosia Nolan in the slightest. With her fortune growing, she was determined to give back to the community. And the gift she gave was the gift of beauty in a region often hardened by years of backbreaking work. By the 1950s, she became known as a great patron of the arts. In 1956, she helped develop the South Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, one of the first symphonies in Arkansas. In 1964, she helped organize the South Arkansas Arts Center, which has hosted plays, musicals, and numerous art exhibitions while encouraging the development of artistic talents in Union County. Her bequest provided an important creative outlet for the area and let the imaginations of residents soar.

One of her proudest achievements was the restoration of the 1839 Cherokee Plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana, a plantation once owned by her grandfather. Beginning in 1972, she spent years carefully restoring the home to its former glory, earning it a place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and several awards for preservation in the coming years, including the first John B. Abbott Award for Historic Preservation from

the South Arkansas Historical Foundation in 2008. She was renowned for her generous spirit as a philanthropist and as a mother and grandmother. She continued to travel, enjoy family, and live with a sense of joy and grace until she passed away in May 2014 at the age of 96. Her stately home is currently on the market. The South Arkansas Arts Center continues to thrive as a creative outlet for local artists and performers and offers after-school programs in art and theater for children.