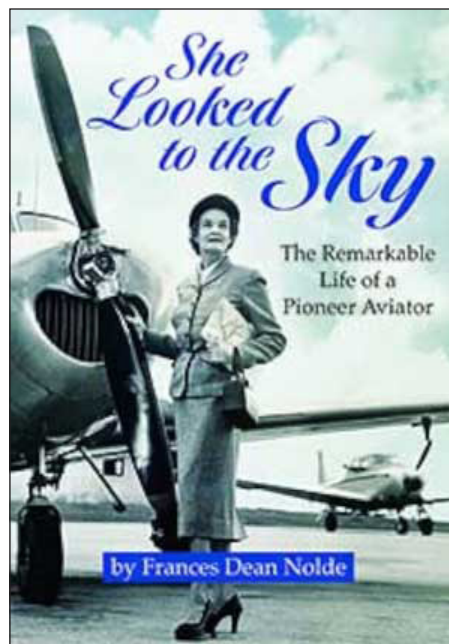


Author Francie Nolde explores her complex relationship with her famous aviator mother

BY CARLENE PHILLIPS | April 12, 2024

In 2022 Frances (Francie) Dean Nolde, an almost fully retired family therapist from Boxborough, set out to write a biography of her mother, Frances (Frannie) Dean Wilcox Nolde, a woman who made headlines, starting in the early 1940s, as a female pioneer in aviation. But in a recent conversation, Nolde said her book, “She Looked to the Sky,” became “so much more than that.” It is as much her memoir as her mother’s biography, exploring the private woman behind the public figure and how that woman influenced Nolde as a person and as a parent. It raises questions of how much the culture of our time shapes us and what may be sacrificed in pursuing personal ambitions.



to write about them. Her mother, who was certainly proud of her career and all she had done to promote women’s equality and was a good writer, surprisingly refused. Francie’s older sister, Sally, also declined and told Francie she was the one to write the biography. But it wasn’t until the pandemic put a halt to her usual activities that Francie had time to look through family photos, celebrity pictures, newspaper clippings, and some of her own childhood reflections to realize how much would be lost if she herself didn’t chronicle the story. (Many of these photos and clippings appear in the book.) She said it helped that her husband is an excellent writer and editor and offered to support her work.

Francie Nolde will be at Fivesparks Sunday, April 21, at 4 p.m. to talk about the book and read passages from it. She said she will leave plenty of time for questions since at a recent book talk the question period lasted longer than the presentation. People connect with many of the relationship issues Nolde describes. “They explore their lives through the book,” she said.

Francie said she had always known about her mother’s accomplishments, and when her mother was in her early 70s, Francie urged her

A world famous pilot

Frannie was born in 1902 into a wealthy family, but her comfortable life changed abruptly when she was 17. Her mother was dying of cancer and Frannie had to give up her dream of becoming an opera singer. She left home and became estranged from her father. She had a short run in a Broadway musical and later a brief career in radio as the lead in a weekly soap opera. An early marriage had ended in divorce and left Frannie as a single mom to raise her daughter, Sally.

In 1933 Frannie married Hans Nolde, a single parent who had four young children. The family settled outside Reading, Pennsylvania on Hans' family estate, Punches Run. (In 1970 the estate opened as the Nolde State Forest.) Hans and Frannie had two more children, Francie being the youngest. They led an extravagant social life, with heavy smoking and drinking as part of their lifestyle. Hans had taken an interest in flying, and he and fellow businessmen founded Reading's airport.

Frannie too became interested in flying, falling in love with "the exhilaration of being airborne, alone ..." and admitted to "an addiction she never expected." As war approached, she turned from flying for pleasure to flying for a cause. She became Reading's Civil Air Patrol courier commander, the first woman in the nation to hold such a position. She was later promoted to full colonel of CAP's national women's program, the highest rank for a woman. She trained female cadets, continuing to assert women's abilities to contribute and to lead. In 1948 she won an all-women's transcontinental airplane race, whose name, the Powder Puff Derby, reflects the misogyny of the times. At the age of 51 she accepted a demanding job in Washington, D.C.

In the early stages of thinking about the book, a friend who had agreed to be the book's designer said to Francie, "You know the book will be "as much about you as it is about your mother." Francie said she hadn't thought about putting herself in it, but as soon as she started writing, she found it was true; "I couldn't exclude me." The book would be her memoir as well as her mother's biography. "Writing the book was a discovery of so many different things," she said.

A complicated woman

From the biographical parts of the book, it is clear Francie admired her mother's accomplishments; she was a woman ahead of her time. "I didn't realize how famous she was until I was writing the book," she said. But the memoir, woven throughout the story of Frannie, shows how conflicted Francie was about "Mother." She was a complicated woman, an enigma. "I consciously did not want to be like her," she said. "The secrets drove me crazy." When Francie tried to find out more about her mother's life—even a simple thing like why she played the piano only once a year on Christmas—her mother refused to answer. "I wanted to be the opposite, an open book," said Francie.



Francie Nolde. (Courtesy photo)

Her mother, always stylishly dressed when not in uniform, was all about appearances. "She put me into her clothes," Francie said. She recalled some "black swirling, taffeta thing" her mother insisted she wear on a date, though it didn't suit Francie. "I struggled with her until my early 30s." And it seemed Frannie had no empathy. Francie recalled how her mother had let her go off to boarding school at age 12 with a new permanent, never thinking how it would be for Francie to wash it and deal with a head of frizz. The worst memory for Francie was being sent off to boarding school at the age of 6 in the middle of a war. She was terrified. When, with daughters of her own, Francie confronted her mother, asking her how she could have done such a thing, her mother simply rationalized her behavior.

Francie tries to put herself in her mother's shoes, to imagine how hard it was for her with seven children, all jockeying for attention. Fly-

ing was a way to get away and have time for herself. And she was kind and generous to other people. Francie felt she did have a “solid grounding of love in early years,” and some of her parents’ seeming negligence may have built character in Francie and her brother. And Frannie was, in some ways, a product of her times. People kept secrets, didn’t talk about feelings, and worried about what other people would think.

After her mother’s death, Francie found a poem she had written about her among her mother’s things and was surprised her mother had kept it. The ending says, “You could have been most anything / You simply chose to be / A woman ahead

of her time.” A poem of tribute, but the words “simply chose” suggest a certain bitterness that the choice hadn’t been to be a loving, empathetic mother.

Francie said that in writing the book, “I made a kind of peace [with mother], which was a surprise to me. I saw she had her own inabilities.” But her big regret is that she can’t talk to her parents now, to ask questions that would help her understand what was going on back then.

“She Looked to the Sky” is available at the General Store and will be on sale at the talk.