

# Elsie Barks, female journalism pioneer and publisher of Electrical Apparatus magazine, dies



Elsie Barks reported for United Press International in the mid-1940s and succeeded her late husband as publisher of Electrical Apparatus, the magazine she helped him launch. (Family photo)

By **Graydon Megan**  
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**E**lsie Barks was a pioneer in journalism and in publishing, from reporting in the mid-1940s for United Press International to succeeding her late husband as publisher of Electrical Apparatus, the magazine she helped him launch more than 50 years ago.

The glossy monthly, now with more than 18,000 subscribers, counts many members of the trade group Electrical Apparatus Service Association among its readers.





Linda Raynes, the association's president and CEO, said she appreciated Barks' "deep fondness and respect for her readers."

"Elsie Dickson Barks was an extraordinary person and a consummate professional," Raynes said in an email. "She was a degreed journalist decades before it was common to see women in the industry. For decades, she was associate publisher and then publisher of a magazine serving male-dominated industries including electromechanical service and repair."

Barks and her husband, Horace Barks, who died in 2012, worked together to produce the magazine, according to senior editor Kevin Jones. The magazine provides information and resources on electromechanical and electronic application and maintenance.

Barks, 95, died of natural causes Dec. 8 in her North Side home, according to her daughter Elizabeth Van Ness.

Van Ness succeeded her mother as publisher of the magazine in 2015.

"It's a niche publication," Van Ness said. "We have a 90 percent advertiser retention rate. She deserves a lot of credit for that."

"She was great with advertisers," said Bill O'Leary, the magazine's managing editor. "She had a great ability to connect with people on a level that wasn't just professional."

She was born Elsie Dickson in Masterton, Ohio, the daughter of a doctor. As valedictorian of Matamoras High School in 1941, she received a four-year scholarship to Marietta College, her daughter said.

She took pre-med courses for two years before deciding medicine wasn't for her. She transferred to the [University of Missouri](#) School of Journalism in Columbia and received her degree in 1945.

"I think she's always been a curious person and had an interest in travel," her daughter said of the switch.

Jones said his hiring came only after he "passed muster with her" in 1985.

"She was very much an old-school kind of journalist," Jones said "She was meticulous in her use of the language, she was a very careful writer and all of this came through not only in her writing but in the way she presented herself."

In her senior year, Barks was recruited by United Press International to be statehouse correspondent in Charleston, W.Va., her daughter said. In early 1946, she was asked to return to the University of Missouri as an instructor in journalism and to work on the school's daily newspaper, the Columbia Missourian.

Around that time she met Horace Barks. They married in 1947 and started Barks Publications in St. Louis four years later.

In 1966, they moved the business to Chicago, where the glossy monthly continues to be published. Barks Publications also produces books and directories for the industry.

Richard Nailen, engineering editor for the magazine, said the publication is aimed at people who design, specify, use, operate, maintain or repair electrical equipment. Elsie Barks had a strong hand in the operation, he said.

"She proofread all the articles, she had questions sometimes, sometimes helpful suggestions and had suggestions for article topics," Nailen said. "She knew what she wanted done and made sure it got done that way — but was never overbearing about it. She was easy to get along with, but she ran things."

Jones said that as an editor and writer, Barks was a mentor to many people.

"She was very influential with young writers, particularly women," Jones said. "After news of her death spread, many mentioned her kindness and generosity, but also the significant influence she had on their careers."

The magazine's managing editor, Bill O'Leary, said Barks hired him as an intern in 2008, when the financial recession didn't favor expanding staff. "She took a chance on me."

O'Leary said he was one of those whom Barks mentored. "I attribute a lot of what I've been able to accomplish in my career to that (chance) and the fact that she mentored me."

Outside of business, Barks loved Chicago. She was a gifted musician who played piano to help pay her way in school and had performed at Chicago Headline Club events. Her love of music made her a regular at both Lyric Opera of Chicago and Chicago Symphony Orchestra performances.

Raynes said that throughout her career, Barks was a role model for many.

"I greatly admired her and how she helmed the Barks organization before and after her husband's passing," Raynes said.

Barks is also survived by her other daughters, Kate Freed and Barbara Barks Wachter; sons Joseph and William; 12 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. Jan. 5, in St. James Cathedral, 65 E. Huron St.

*Graydon Megan is a freelance reporter*