



Dallas M. Burke dies; Madison County Coroner Nonn calls her 'undoubtedly the grandest - of our own'

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
January 28 2017 3:35 PM



EDWARDSVILLE - Madison County Coroner Steve P. Nonn announced this afternoon "with deepest regret and much sadness," the death of **Dallas M. Burke**. He described Burke as "one - and undoubtedly the grandest - of our own."

Madison County Coroner Emeritus Dallas M. Burke died at 3:07 p.m. Friday, Jan. 27, at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis at 90 years old.

Nonn said Burke served the citizens of Madison County from 1972 until the year 2000 when she chose not to seek re-election to an eighth term in office. Although she turned

the reins of the office over to current Coroner Nonn, Dallas was never thought of as “ex-coroner”, “former coroner”, or “retired coroner” as her influences and philosophies with the coroner’s office remained strong and resolute.

“Since I have been coroner, I have had one single mantra that has carried me through difficult and hard decisions. It was W.W.D.D.....what would Dallas do”, said Coroner Steve Nonn. “She supported me for the endorsement when I first considered running, she laid out a course of professionalism for the office, and provided me an office that was held in high esteem.”

It was tragic circumstances that first vaulted her to the Office of Coroner. In 1972, her husband Thomas J. “Bud” Burke, Jr., the owner of Burke Funeral Home in Alton and experienced as a Madison County Deputy Coroner, had won the Democratic nomination for county coroner. In May of that year, Bud was stricken and succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 52. Recognizing her experience with the mechanics of the coroner’s office from her assistance to Bud with death investigations coupled with formal training and medical knowledge as a registered nurse, Dallas was named to Bud’s spot on the ballot.

In November, 1972 the voters of Madison County elected Dallas M. Burke, R.N., as the first woman in Madison County and the State of Illinois to hold the position of County Coroner. Dallas Burke took the office forward in the years that followed moving the office from being one whose existence in government operations was measured mostly as the need to fulfill a requirement of statutory law and operated through the county’s network of funeral homes to a professionalized death investigation agency.

Early on she, along with many of the volunteer, funeral home-based deputy coroners, completed formalized training in the science of death investigation through St. Louis University under the direction of the late St. Louis City and County Medical Examiner, Dr. George Gantner, MD. Additionally, she trained through the Illinois Coroner and Medical Examiners Association, serving as a District Director for the organization as well.

Coroner’s inquests became formalized hearings taking place at the courthouse with jurors selected by the jury commission rather than a hearing with the coroner’s hand-picked jurors at a funeral home. Recognizing that death investigations were becoming more complex and more time consuming than her willing, well-intentioned, and well-meaning cadre of volunteer deputy coroners could handle, she made her case to the county board and was approved to hire full-time career coroner’s investigators to further professionalize the office.

Shortly thereafter, she transferred business office operations of the coroner's office from the confines of her funeral home to the new Madison County Administration Building in Edwardsville. Then, in 1993, in what she always felt was one of her greatest achievements, Madison County opened the first county operated morgue and autopsy facility in downstate Illinois.

Previously, forensic examinations had been performed at area funeral homes. Coroner Burke, through the acquisition of free surplus and used equipment from the old Alton State Hospital and other area health care facilities and having an existing, vacant county building modified, managed to modernize this aspect of office operations for less than \$50,000. With the opening of the morgue, she rebranded the coroner's office as a vital entity of public safety and public health for the people of Madison County.

Prior to the completion of her final term, Coroner Burke began the process of having her career and experienced death investigators gain national certification through the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. This process continued and achieved one hundred percent compliance after Nonn took the helm.

Bear in mind that many of these administrative tasks were being undertaken while she was fully engaged as an active, in-the-field investigator herself. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Dallas Burke could be seen on the job and she was seeing the worst of what mankind is capable of doing to another.

"There were adults. There were children. There were infants. Her cases ranged from the complex and complicated to the simple and routine, but each and every one was equally respected and she spoke eloquently for every stilled voice that she represented," Nonn said. "She did everything she could to unscramble the carnage and try to answer the myriad questions that followed. She knocked on many doors during those years and delivered news that no one wants to hear. She quietly endured the anger that comes with grief and offered solace to the bereaved."

Visitation for Coroner Emeritus Dallas M. Burke is scheduled for Monday, January 30, 2017, at Gent Funeral Home in Alton, Illinois. Funeral services are planned for 10 a.m. Tuesday, January 31 at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Alton, Illinois. Interment will follow at St. Patrick's Cemetery in Godfrey, Illinois. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to St. Mary's Catholic School or the Alton Symphony Orchestra.