



## Alma W. Byrnes

September 9, 1924 - December 8, 2019

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Our extraordinary, beautiful, and lovable Alma Lucille Walton Byrnes passed away quietly in her sleep at home on December 8, 2019, with her beloved dog Rosie by her side. Alma drank down every drop of love, adventure, experience, joy, and laughter her 95-year-old cup of life offered. Rooted in love, Alma was born to Carvel and Belvia Walton in Gorham, Illinois. As a four-year-old, Alma remembered looking out a paned farm window at her grandfather's house, "I made a decision that I was going to see farther and I was going to go far away." This self-awareness and determination wasn't born of dissatisfaction or trauma, but from the innate knowledge she was destined for more and from her great desire to live a life of wonder. This yearning became the guiding hallmark of her long life. Alma was the "quintessential whole package." She was gifted with elegant beauty, a grand intellect, creativity, an artistic eye, charisma, a sense of fun, and a loving nature. In her youth, not only was Alma the prom queen, she was also a stellar student. It wasn't enough for her to read about exotic places, she wanted to experience foreign countries firsthand. It was this adventuresome spirit that shaped Alma's remarkable life.

After graduating high school in the early 1940s, Alma moved to St. Louis where her real life began. That's where she learned to fly Piper Cub planes on the Mississippi River and where her love of knowledge and art in all forms developed. It was also in St. Louis that she fell in love and married a coal magnate. Sadly, her husband died while they were living in Mexico. There, as a young widow, her lifelong love affair with all things Meso-American and Pre-Columbian was born. For over a decade she made her home in both Mexico City and Acapulco, but made long trips to San Miguel de Allende to study art, sculpture, and design. Apart from her aesthetic interests, Alma was accomplished at deep-sea fishing, water skiing, and art collecting. In the early 1960s, Annie Goldfarb, Alma's best friend, invited Alma to join her friends, Mackie Sanders and Albert Byrnes, to shop for gifts to take back to the States. "At the end of the day," Alma remembered, "we all went back to my place for cocktails. Al showed no interest in me, but was smitten and

dancing on my terrace with another of our friends. When Mackie, Al's dear friend, got in the cab to leave, he looked me in the eye with certainty and said, 'Al Byrnes is going to marry you.'" Mackie's prophetic statement began to unfold when Al and Alma began an intense, long distance romance. Al was the owner of Byrnes Furniture in Oxnard, CA, and made many trips to Mexico to court Alma. It was during Alma's trip to visit him, while staying at The Beverly Hills Hotel, that Al proposed. And so began a love affair and union that would span forty-five years until Al's death in 2005.

Byrnes Furniture was already successful before Al met Alma, but it was her design and interior decorating acumen that made their business sales soar. It was in Oxnard with their son Alex, and Al's children Bara and Greg that they made themselves into a family. In the early 1970s, the Byrnes sold their business and moved to Santa Barbara where Alma used their homes as palettes for her ceaseless creativity. Her sense of design, color, drama and elegance coalesced into immersive interior experiences of beauty, art and style. A crowning expression of this was the home they built in Montecito. Alma and Al created a life full of friends, and were fixtures and social figures in their Santa Barbara and Montecito communities. Always a lover of art and antiquities, Alma partnered with a friend to open Summerland Antiques. Though she had a passion for collecting fine arts and antiquities, one of Alma's favorite weekend activities was to go to the Santa Barbara Drive-In Swap Meet, with Albert always trailing her to schlep her must-have finds. Despite creating a life of luxury and privilege for herself, Alma never forgot her more humble beginnings. Alma was a philanthropist, who gave of her time and energy by serving on boards and chairing events for Santa Barbara Art Museum Women's Board, Music Academy of the West, CALM, Child Help, MADD, and many more organizations. While Alma possessed an agile and fierce intellect, her ability to have fun, dance, celebrate and party were also unique characteristics. The consummate hostess, she threw the best parties, always with unique gifts, themes, and musicians, turning even simple BBQs on the terrace of their Birnam Wood home into memorable gatherings. Her favorite cocktail was a martini, and a common greeting of hers was, "How about a glass of Chardonnay?" Alma and Al's home was always full of generous laughter, connection and fun. Alma loved the desert and Al golfed, so they also enjoyed their Rancho Mirage home at the Springs Country Club. As members of Montecito Country Club and Birnam Wood Country Club, Alma delighted in attending all the luncheons, parties and events. Alma and Al had many dear friends, too numerous to name, who shared their zeal for life. Together with these friends, they partied, sought adventures, made one-of-a-kind memories, and explored the world.

Alma's personality was magnetic. She had a spark of energy about her, the ability to connect with and engage people. The same traits that made her so successful in the antique and furniture décor businesses — her outgoingness, warmth and sense of humor — made Alma memorable even with strangers. Throughout her life, Alma maintained her

beauty, elegance and flawless skin. In her hospital bed, after a lung removal surgery ten years ago, she looked radiant. “Why are you wearing makeup? You just had surgery,” her niece said. True to form, Alma quipped, “Lipstick and earrings, never be without them.” Alma also was always impeccable and fashionable in her dress and style. Even well into her late eighties, heads turned when Alma entered a room. At ninety, while at Stearn’s Wharf with her family, dressed in a newsboy leather cap, an electric blue sweater dress with a pop art design on the front, and supported by her hot pink cane — Alma indulged throngs of Chinese tourists who flocked to have their photos taken with her. Alma’s life was full of these unique moments that illustrate the beauty she exuded both inside and out.

Alma’s childhood declaration to see farther and experience bigger things, fueled by her almost insatiable hunger for knowledge, led her to travel the globe, visiting all the continents several times over. Whether it was Petra, Paris, Egypt, Turkey, Africa or China, in her ninety-five years, there were few places in the world she left unexperienced. Alma wasn’t simply a tourist; she was an adventurer and explorer. She sought to immerse herself in the locale’s art, culture, and people. Even well into her old age, Alma continued to travel – showing her son and grandchildren the many countries and peoples she had fallen in love with. Alma shared many of her life stories: how she narrowly got out on the last ship out of China as it fell to Communism, was spit on by a camel, and actually got into the ring once to bullfight.

Alma was full of life, loving, caring, and compassion. She experienced life with her heart wide open. She never forgot a birthday or occasion, and was known for her “just because” gift giving. Alma was steadfast and generous in her support, inspiration and encouragement of others. She was a wonderful wife, mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, and beloved friend. She was insightful, wise and loved completely. Alma treasured her family and grandchildren. Her zest for life never waned, even after her beloved husband died at ninety-four. The empty space in her heart and bed was filled by her faithful companion, Rosie, the fluffy white dog who lit up her life. Though Alma suffered significant decline during the last three years – sight-robbing macular degeneration, cognitive impairment and immobility – her first ninety-two were remarkable.

Alma lived life on her terms, she was an independent thinker who courageously reached forward into experiences in ways few women of her era would. She participated in, thrived, and lived her extraordinary life fully. Like all lives, hers was not without challenges or sorrows, but she met these with strength, purpose, resolve, and resilience. Alma’s presence in other’s lives left a lasting and loving impression. With gratitude, we take comfort in knowing she was received into the arms of her loving Albert and set free on her next bold adventure. No doubt Alma is drinking in deeply this infinite love that awaits us all.

Alma was preceded in death by her husband, Albert Byrnes, step-daughter Bara Byrnes,

her parents Carvel and Belvia Walton, and her four siblings: Edward, Carvel Jr., Bobby, and Oma. Alma is survived by her son, Alex Byrnes (Tina); her stepson, Greg Byrnes (Kelly); and her former daughter-in-law, Kim Byrnes. She also is survived by her grandchildren: Lauren Byrnes, Jordan Byrnes, and Nicole Patterson (Jesse); her great-grandchildren, Everett and Leah; her niece, Catherine Weissenberg (Rob Saperstein) and her great-niece, Kaitlyn Saperstein. The family extends its thanks to Yollie and Fred Abo who dutifully tended Alma for the last nine years. A service was held at the Santa Barbara Cemetery, where Alma was interred beside her soulmate, Albert. If you wish to remember Alma, please consider a donation to your favorite charity in her name.

# Cemetery

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## **Santa Barbara Cemetery**

901 Channel Drive

Santa Barbara, CA, 93108

# Events

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**DEC**

**17**

## **Celebration of Life**

01:00AM

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Santa Barbara Cemetery Chapel

901 Channel Dr., Santa Barbara, CA, US, 93108

# Comments

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**Scott C. Reid** - December 30, 2019 at 01:03 PM