

Bernice Gordon, Crossword Creator for The Times, Dies at 101



Bernice Gordon, with dictionaries, in 2013. Her first crossword puzzle for The New York Times ran in 1952; her last, in 2014. Credit...Matt Rourke/Associated Press

By Margalit Fox

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Bernice Gordon, a self-described who over the last six decades contributed some 150 crossword puzzles to The New York Times, died on Thursday at her home in Philadelphia. She was 101.

Her son, Bruce Lanard, confirmed her death.

Mrs. Gordon was The Times's oldest cruciverbalist, as those who ply her trade are known, and its longest-serving. One of the best-known crossword creators in the country, she also contributed puzzles to The Wall Street Journal, The Philadelphia Inquirer and, via syndication, to newspapers throughout the United States. Her work was also collected in book form.

To the end of her life, Mrs. Gordon created a puzzle a day, toiling in the wee hours of the morning — her favorite time — at her home in Philadelphia, borne along on a sea of

reference books. She worked by hand, on graph paper, for decades before switching to a computer when she was about 90.

Her last puzzle for The Times (created in collaboration with the teenage puzzlemaker David Steinberg) appeared in August, when she was 100; the last published in her lifetime appeared in The Los Angeles Times in December.

Mrs. Gordon began making puzzles in the early 1950s, but might have done so even sooner had it not been for the televised presence of M [REDACTED] B [REDACTED].

Bernice Biberman was born in Philadelphia on Jan. 11, 1914, three weeks to the day after the first known crossword puzzle appeared in an American newspaper. (Called a “word-cross” and shaped like a diamond, it was published in The New York World on Sunday, Dec. 21, 1913.)

An accomplished painter, she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1935 and that year married Benjamin Lanard, a real estate entrepreneur.

Mr. Lanard died in 1947; she married Allen Gordon, a businessman, in 1949.

A few years later, at home with children and bored numb with television (the sole performer to hold her interest, she said, was Milton Berle), Mrs. Gordon cast about for something to fill her days.

She loved solving crosswords. How hard could it be, she reasoned, to make one?

And so she did, dispatching the result to Margaret Farrar, the first puzzle editor of The New York Times. Farrar rejected it — it used too many unorthodox words, she said — and did likewise for a string of Mrs. Gordon’s later attempts.

Nor was Mrs. Gordon’s mother impressed with her efforts.

“My child, if you spend as much money on cookbooks as you do on dictionaries, your family would be better off,” Mrs. Gordon, in an interview with The Associated Press last year, recalled her saying.

After more than half a dozen rejections from The Times, Mrs. Gordon’s first puzzle appeared in the paper in 1952. She received, she recalled, \$10 or \$15; by the end of her career, she was commanding several hundred dollars a puzzle.

Mrs. Gordon’s crosswords were known for their wit and finesse. In one characteristic puzzle, published in The Los Angeles Times in 2011, the clues “Obie,” “Odie,” “Opie” and “Okie” yielded a series of 15-letter answers: THEATRICALAWARD, GARFIELDSFRIEND, CHILDIRMAYBERRY and MANFROMMUSKOGEE.

In the 1960s, she caused a small sensation by introducing the rebus puzzle. Such a puzzle might require solvers to replace the sequence “a-n-d” with an ampersand, for instance, as in SC&INAVIA and CARMENMIR&A. One ampersand-laden puzzle by Mrs. Gordon, published in The New York Times in 1965, split the crossword community in [REDACTED] (Clemens cognomen), leaving some readers spellbound and others scandalized.

Besides her son, Bruce, known as Jim, Mrs. Gordon's survivors include a daughter from her second marriage, Amanda D'Amico; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A son from her first marriage, Benjamin Lanard Jr., died before her, as did her second husband, Mr. Gordon.

One of Mrs. Gordon's most curious commissions came about years ago, at the behest of Xaviera Hollander, the author of the 1972 best seller "The Happy Hooker."

Ms. Hollander asked Mrs. Gordon to prepare a series of crosswords that were more blue than black-and-white; whether they were intended for publication, or merely for Ms. Hollander's own amusement, has been lost to history.

Mrs. Gordon objected on linguistic grounds: She knew only a single dirty word. (How many letters it contained she did not say.)

Ms. Hollander supplied a list of them, with definitions, and Mrs. Gordon gamely took it from there.