

Mary Rheay

March 19, 2008

MARY LOUISE RHEAY, 88, of Canton died Wednesday, March 19, 2008 of breast cancer at her Canton residence. The body was cremated. Memorial service plans will be announced. Cremation Society of the South is in charge of arrangements

Mary Louise Rheay was 5 years old when she walked into a public library for the first time. As she stared at its wall of books, the plot of her life became clear. From that moment, all Miss Rheay wanted to be was a librarian.

She started her nearly 50-year career in the children's department of the Atlanta Public Library in 1941. By the time she retired in 1990, she was director of the Cobb County Library System --- a job that required her to battle over budgets, stand up to political pressure and oversee complicated construction projects. Her duties may have shifted, but her mission stayed the same.

"She learned to read when she was 4 years old," said her nephew Jack Duncan of Canton, "and the most important thing to her, next to her family, was just sharing her love of books."

After she graduated from Alabama College (now University of Montevallo), the Alabama native moved to Atlanta in 1937 and later earned a master's degree in library science from Emory University.

She stayed at the downtown branch of the Atlanta Public Library and rose to assistant director before she retired in 1975.

Without missing a beat, she took over as director of the Cobb County Library System that same year. She piloted it through enormous growth, added new branches, lobbied for funds, presided over professional associations and encouraged scores of younger librarians to enter the field.

"Miss Rheay was the ultimate Southern lady, assertive but never anything but polite," said Patty Latch of Marietta, program coordinator for the Cobb library system. "She had an iron fist in a velvet glove style," Ms. Latch said. "She had a vision of where she wanted the library to go and a passion for library service, especially for children. And she wouldn't do anything to dilute that."

Miss Rheay commuted to work from the home she shared with her late sister's family. She treated her two nephews to trips to New York, enjoyed dinners and concerts with friends and loved to hole up in her bedroom surrounded by a stack of British murder mysteries.

The unwavering professionalism she brought to her job was ingrained from the beginning. When Miss Rheay first worked at the downtown library, her supervisor would stand at the front door and inspect each female employee who entered the building. "They had to have hats and gloves on," Ms. Latch said, "because a librarian couldn't be seen out on the street looking less than respectable."

Miss Rheay made a habit of cutting through Davison's bargain basement on her way to work and for the rest of her life, she rarely wore anything but classic-looking dresses. "She had all these favorites that she wore for 30 years, because she stayed exactly the same size," Ms. Latch said. "But they never looked out of date or out of style." Her classic approach included an aversion to technology, her nephew said. "The library was moving more into the computer age when my aunt left, and she wasn't sorry to miss that," he said. "The thought of working on a computer never interested her." Perhaps she simply she didn't need one. "She had an incredible memory," Ms. Latch said. "I'd sit there and fumble while she could tell you exactly what someone's name was, where they were from and what they did."

There are no immediate survivors.