

In Memoriam, Ida Lou Coley

Local historian and EHS stalwart

Adam Kaye published this account in the San Diego Union Tribune, 9 July 2005:

Ida Lou Coley, a resolute community activist, historian and retired children's physical therapist, has died. She was 78.

Coley died Wednesday at the same McNeil Avenue bungalow she had lived in as a 10-year-old. Her loved ones were by her side.

Her blue eyes sparkled and sense of humor persisted throughout her final day, said Sharon Hartwig, Coley's niece. "She said she wanted Clark Gable to visit," Hartwig said.

Beneath a diminutive voice was a steely preservationist who fought to keep a library, post office and elementary school in the downtown district. "I'd call her the 'iron butterfly,'" said Elaine Harrison, an Encinitas resident and Coley's childhood friend. "She'd go to the City Council meetings with this voice you could barely hear, but boy would they listen."

A stout walker, Coley brought her activism right to the hilly streets of Encinitas, which she hiked to gather signatures for petitions.

She led a 2002 committee that rallied successfully to keep a planned Encinitas library at a downtown location rather than moving it to Quail Gardens Drive, as backers of a ballot measure had sought. The measure lost decisively. Downtown Encinitas 101 MainStreet Association's executive director, Peder Norby, worked alongside Coley to defeat the initiative. "Some people can fight nasty, some people can fight abrasively," Norby said. "Ida Lou would fight just as hard, but in a fashion that you couldn't get upset with her."

Earlier, Coley and the association filed legal appeals against the U.S Postal Service to block plans to close a Second Street post office. The challenge prolonged the life of the downtown facility, but it closed in 2001. Later, in 2003, Coley rose in opposition to the planned closure of Pacific View School's Third Street campus, where schools of one sort or another had operated since 1883.

A student project to preserve more than a century's worth of memories included a visit by Coley, who treated the children to a tap dance she had learned at a recreation center that once occupied the Pacific View site.

"I'm an extrovert one day a year and that was it for this year," Coley said in 2003.

As a girl during the Great Depression, Ida Lou and her friend, Shirley Ashton, were oblivious to the economy, “swinging away on her own black tire her brothers rigged up in her back yard, and the fun of gathering wildflowers on Cottonwood Creek, and writing secret code messages that we buried under an old eucalyptus tree for the others to discover. Oh, and the making up tap dances after learning steps at the recreation center,” Ashton recalled.

Coley graduated from San Dieguito High School in 1945 as class salutatorian and senior class president. The pages of her yearbook show Ida Lou as a volleyball, basketball and field hockey player, and as a cheerleader. Her pet peeve was fast drivers, but her ambition was to learn to drive. “Ida Lou will be remembered for both her success as a leader and her sincere friendliness,” the yearbook states.

She went on to study at San Jose State University before beginning a 35-year career in Palo Alto at Children’s Hospital at Stanford, where she became head of occupational therapy. In that position, she wrote a college textbook published in 1978, *Pediatric Assessment of Self-Care Activities*. She developed specialized appliances and devices for handicapped children, including a spoon with a strap so children with arthritis could feed themselves.

“She worked to make hospital settings more comfortable for children,” Hartwig said. While Coley devoted her professional life to children, she never married or had children of her own. Her nephews and nieces filled that role, Hartwig said.

Upon her retirement, Coley returned to Encinitas. Her writings have catalogued many episodes of local history. “She had not only a physical storehouse but a mental storehouse of so much information,” said Mac Hartley, author of the book, *Encinitas Heritage & History*. “She was such a quiet, gentle person who had a world of her own as well as one that reached out to the community,” Hartley said.

Another local history writer, Wendy Haskett, said Coley was the first to document the history of Encinitas. “In her gentle way, she was a wonderful storyteller,” Haskett said. “She was just a gold mine.”

Coley attained her high school dream of learning to drive, but the notoriously frugal woman owned but two cars in her lifetime.

The second of them, a spotless 1965 VW Beetle, remains in the detached garage of her bungalow. Coley had said she hopes the home can be preserved as a historic building.

Coley’s later years brimmed with distinction. In 2003, Coley was one of 10 North County Times Women of Merit recipients. She was named grand marshal of the 2001 Encinitas Holiday Parade. “I was so excited when I heard the news, I had to

hang up the phone and call back,” Coley said at the time. “I’m the most excited person in Encinitas.”

Coley said she had participated in an Encinitas parade 60 years earlier. “I wore an Indian maiden costume and rode in some strange contraption. This time, I will wear something more conservative and be riding in a carriage.”

Ida Lou Coley was born in Ada, Oklahoma, on May 29, 1929, to a farmer, James Franklin Coley. Her mother was Gladys Coley.

Her survivors include a sister, Artie Sundeen of Pasadena, and eight nephews and nieces: Sharon Hartwig, Irene Coley, Steve Sundeen, Paul Coley, James Coley, David Sundeen, Kenneth Coley Jr., and Robert Coley. Her longtime friend and companion is Rolf Schroeder.

See also:

www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2005/08/28/ida-lou-coley-remembered-at-memorial/

