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'Nontraditionalist' remembered

By Val Webb

Staff Writer

valwebb@gulfcoastnews.com

A quiet crusader whose influences helped stitch together the social fabric of Fairhope, Annie "Butch" Sheldon's convictions ran deep. Her children remember her as a courageous advocate for civil rights, a willing community volunteer and a stubborn nontraditionalist whose practical side balanced the impulses of her colorful artist husband.

Sheldon died Sunday morn-

ing, at home in the fairytale castle the late Craig Sheldon crafted from stone, finely carved wood and windblown imagination. She was one day shy of her 87th birthday.

Inside the castle on Monday, the three Sheldon children — Craig Sheldon Jr., Susan Megrez Rudolf and Pagan Mosher — remembered their mother's adventurous streak. She celebrated her 85th birthday with a spin in the open cockpit of a biplane, Mosher said, and the following year went up in an ultra-

light.

"She was a lifelong nontraditionalist," Mosher said.

Married more than 50 years to artist-sculptor-writer Craig Sheldon, a brilliant and unconventional man who once ran for city council on a promise to fill the water tower with gin, "Butch" Sheldon had her own causes to uphold.

Sheldon's great-grandmother had flouted convention in Monticello, Fla., to offer medical care to the town's poor black residents, in a makeshift infirmary

set up on her porch. And it was in Monticello, Sheldon's children said, that the horrors of racial injustice became real to her.

"She went to see a nice neighbor man who would invite local children to play cards with him on his porch," Rudolf said. "She was about eight years old."

The neighbor proudly pulled a string hanging out of his pocket to show the child his prize: the teeth of a black man who had been tortured the night before.



Photo submitted by Sheldon Family

Annie "Butch" Sheldon is pictured with her husband, artist Craig Sheldon, who passed away in December 1997. Butch died on the eve of her 87th birthday.

"That was a turning point for her, and she never went back," Mosher said.

In 1940, the diminutive girl from Florida met and married Craig Sheldon, a handsome young Marine who pinned her with her lifelong nickname, "Butch." At the close of World War II, the couple moved to Fairhope and began raising their family. "Butch" Sheldon's civil rights sensibilities persisted, and she allowed her children to develop friendships outside Fairhope's white community.

Mosher recalled an incident during the 1960s, when she served on the teen board of the Elbow Room, a youth dance hall that stood roughly where the municipal complex is today. Mosher did not confront a black student who dared to dance with a white partner, and the ensuing controversy eventually resulted in the closing of the popular club.

"Mother told everyone, 'It's my fault. I did not raise her to be aware that was a problem,'" she said.

Later, Sheldon organized an interracial women's group to bridge Fairhope's separate ethnic communities.

A founding member of Theater 98, she helped stage and perform dozens of productions in Cummings Hall, "a glorious old building where the Faulkner campus is today," Mosher said. She enlisted her husband to build sets and write scripts.

Sheldon also helped found the Thomas

Hospital Auxiliary, and volunteered there for years. She was among the earliest members of the Eastern Shore Art Association, and worked many years at the Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce and the Fairhope Single Tax Colony.

Despite an abiding lack of interest in public recognition, she was a talented and prolific writer whose work appeared in publications including "Woman's Day," Rudolf said. Her practice of writing daily resulted in a priceless family legacy, Mosher said. In the tower room of the castle, she left stacks of her detailed journals, a lifelong effort she stopped only about a month ago, chronicling the family's daily lives.

In addition to her three children, Sheldon is survived by daughter-in-law Elisabeth Shephard Sheldon; two sons-in-law, John Thomas Rudolf and William Dean Mosher; three grandchildren, Anastasia Rudolf Deaton, Megrez Ravel Mosher and Cleveland Turner Mosher; three great-grandchildren, Jackson Kent Deaton, Hallie Reese Deaton and John Thomas Deaton; a brother, John Leonard Lloyd; sister-in-law, Mary Ann Lloyd; three nephews and a niece.

Sheldon requested her body be donated to medical education and science at the University of South Alabama. A memorial service will be held Thursday at 2 p.m. at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Daphne.