

Hilda Mae Snoops dies at 74

Longtime dear friend,
official hostess for
Governor Schaefer

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SUN STAFF

Hilda Mae Snoops, close companion of Maryland Comptroller William Donald Schaefer and the state's official hostess when he was governor, died yesterday from complications of emphysema at Howard County General Hospital. She was 74. Mr. Schaefer was at Mrs. Snoops' bedside when she passed away at 1:20 p.m.

"She was a great girl and a gracious hostess and fully aware of her surroundings until the end of her life," Mr. Schaefer said yesterday.

Mrs. Snoops, who had lived in recent months at Harmony Hall Retirement Community in Columbia, was



AMY DAVIS : SUN STAFF

Couple: Then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer with Hilda Mae Snoops on Sept. 11, 1990, at his election headquarters.

rarely seen in public after Mr. Schaefer's last term as governor ended in 1995.

She was present in January for his swearing-in as comptroller. Although she used a wheelchair in recent years, her health in obvious decline, she sat with him on the House of Delegates rostrum. For the National Anthem, he helped her stand.

An official statement released by Mr. Schaefer yesterday afternoon read, "Hilda Mae was my special and closest friend, my confidante and my colleague. She was always there for me — during the

good times and especially during times of adversity.

"I will always take great comfort in our special relationship and pride in what she did on her own to improve the quality of life for others as a nurse and as an official hostess of the Governor's Mansion.

"The work she did to renovate the mansion, improve its landscaping and install its signature fountain will live on for many generations to enjoy — a fitting tribute to a fine lady."

Mrs. Snoops, a retired nurse and health care analyst, was a [See Snoops, 4A]

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divorced mother of three and grandmother of seven. She was among the bachelor governor's closest friends for 30 years and one of the few people with whom he felt completely comfortable.

For much of that time, including Mr. Schaefer's 15 years as mayor of Baltimore, she enjoyed his company in peaceful obscurity. She attended public events with Mr. Schaefer, joined him for dinners in Baltimore restaurants and vacationed with him in Ocean City, where they later shared ownership of a house in Montego Bay.

Then in May 1986, Mr. Schaefer stood on the porch of his West Baltimore rowhouse and declared his candidacy for governor. At his side, in a spot so prominent that some Schaefer aides expressed surprise, stood Mrs. Snoops.

Reporters, legislators and the public speculated endlessly — and futilely — about their relationship. Neither Mr. Schaefer nor Mrs. Snoops ever discussed the friendship publicly.

Aides said the two clearly were devoted to each other, joined in a private alliance against the pressures of public life.

"She has been a close friend of mine for years," the governor said in a 1990 interview. "We have been, I think, trying to stay out of the public eye in our private life. She has her place and I have my place."

Though Mrs. Snoops insisted on shielding her personal life, she seemed to enjoy the very public role that she assumed with Mr. Schaefer's election as governor. When Mr. Schaefer took the oath of office in January 1987, Mrs. Snoops held the Bible.

That month, Mrs. Snoops retired from her job as a health insurance program analyst for the federal Health Care Financing Administration. Soon she took over supervision of the Governor's Mansion, the official residence just across State Circle from the State House.

The public was eager for details about the new state hostess — as she was formally declared in a message from the governor — and about her relationship with Mr. Schaefer; now 77.

But Mr. Schaefer was renowned for his ability to deflect questions about his life outside the job. And Mrs. Snoops turned out to be equally dismissive of questions about herself and her activities as hostess.

She presided over receptions at the Governor's Mansion. She often accompanied Mr. Schaefer as he traveled to political conventions or on economic development tours overseas. She was with him when he visited with President

George Bush during Orioles games at Memorial Stadium and when he greeted Queen Elizabeth II at a Washington reception.

Strong-willed and determined, Mrs. Snoops had apparently been known for her forceful personality all her life.

She was born in Baltimore on Sept. 6, 1924, a daughter of Minnie and Lawrence Edward Noone. Her mother was a homemaker, her father an electrician.

Mrs. Snoops, who grew up in West Baltimore, completed Gwynns Falls Junior High School and Western High School before graduating from the Church Home and Hospital School of Nursing as a registered nurse.

In 1947, she wed Charles Snoops, a civil engineer. They had a daughter and two sons and were divorced in 1962. In a 1987 newspaper interview, Mr. Snoops took credit for introducing Mrs. Snoops to Mr. Schaefer during one of his first political campaigns.

By the end of Mr. Schaefer's first term as governor, Mrs. Snoops was acknowledged to be spending several nights a week in the Governor's Mansion. Mr. Schaefer spent most of his time at his boyhood home in West Baltimore.

Some legislators and government officials who encountered Mrs. Snoops declared her a charming hostess, a pleasant, no-nonsense companion for the governor. Others found her difficult.

Zealously protective of the governor, she scolded aides whose work she deemed sub par. She ordered the reassignment of at least one state trooper who questioned one of her directives. She controlled entry to the mansion, and some of the governor's closest assistants found they were not on the list of approved guests — for either social events or work sessions held there.

But it was Mrs. Snoops' redecoration of the Governor's Mansion that won her the greatest attention.

In the mid-1980s, during the administration of Gov. Harry Hughes, the mansion's public rooms had been redone, in careful consultation with historians, to reflect some of Maryland's traditions.

But Mrs. Snoops suggested the museum-quality rooms were cold and unfriendly, and she set about redecorating and then re-landscaping the mansion grounds, using funds raised by Schaefer supporters as well public dollars.

By mid-1991, the public money spent on mansion projects — both in private quarters and public areas — totaled \$1.7 million.

Fans of Hughes' restoration protested that Mrs. Snoops was needlessly undoing the work that



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR: SUN STAFF

Namesake: Hilda Mae Snoops on April 28, 1988, at the christening of a new container crane at the South Locust Point Marine Terminal. The crane was named for her.

former first lady Patricia Hughes had supervised. Governor Schaefer fumed publicly that her critics were wrong-headed and that Mrs. Snoops had saved the state thousands of dollars by working as a volunteer.

Infuriated by what she viewed as unfair assessments of her efforts, Mrs. Snoops announced abruptly three years after her work had begun that she might empty the mansion of the furnishings she'd installed, sell the fountain and bring back the "old, shabby and dull" items that had graced the building before her arrival.

She never followed through on the threat.

The declaration was characteristic of the straight-talking Mrs. Snoops. She did not shrink from confronting people she believed had slighted her or Mr. Schaefer.

"When you're in public life, critics always rip and attack you, and she took a lot of hits because of it," Helen Delich Bentley, a former GOP congresswoman and federal maritime commissioner, said yesterday.

"She tried to make the mansion a proud and comfortable place to visit, and I think she enjoyed doing it. She knew what was right, and she made sure that it was done that way," she said.

Mrs. Bentley, added, "She thought the world of William Donald Schaefer and cared very deeply for him and was willing to give her life for him."

Viewing will be from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. today, and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. tomorrow and Monday at Ruck Towson Funeral Home, 1050 York Road.

Services will be held at the funeral home at 10 a.m. Tuesday with burial at Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens.

In addition to Mr. Schaefer, Mrs. Snoops is survived by two sons, Lawrence A. Snoops of Sykesville and Craig A. Snoops of Millersville; a daughter, Dorothy L. Levi of Pikesville; and seven grandchildren.

Sun staff writer C. Fraser Smith contributed to this article.