

OBITUARIES

Activist Virginia Foster Durr Dies

She Helped Post Bail for Rosa Parks After Protest on Bus

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Virginia Foster Durr, 95, who went from an upbringing as a southern aristocrat to a political reawakening in Washington during the New Deal era, leading her into a life of activism in civil rights, died of respiratory infection Feb. 24 at a nursing home in Carlisle, Pa.

Her early life in her native Birmingham was one of tranquillity anchored by the connection to a distinguished family line. Her grandfather was a Confederate captain and later a U.S. congressman. Her uncle was governor of Tennessee.

In 1933, she came to Washington with her husband, Clifford Durr, who joined the Roosevelt administration's Federal Communications Commission.

For more than 10 years, they lived in a big house on Alexandria's Seminary Hill, hosting social events with a political edge. Their guests were southern legislators, labor leaders and government bureaucrats.

Through her brother-in-law Hugo Black, a Supreme Court justice, Mrs. Durr became friends with Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson, Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas and other New Deal stalwarts.

Through those contacts, Mrs. Durr developed an interest in poli-

tics and became involved with the Women's Democratic Committee.

She served as vice chairman of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, which was widely viewed as a way to discourage blacks, women and the poor from voting, and she was a leader in the Southern Conference on Human Welfare.

In 1948, she ran for a U.S. Senate seat from Virginia on the Progressive Party ticket.

"I believe in equal rights for all citizens and I believe the tax money that is now going for war and armaments and the militarization of our country could be better used to give everyone in the United States a secure standard of living," Mrs. Durr said at the time.

She didn't win, but she continued as a foot soldier in the New Deal and civil rights movement.

Mrs. Durr and her husband returned to Alabama in 1951 and quickly found themselves in the center of the fledgling civil rights movement.

Her beliefs made her a pariah in the community.

It was the Durrs who posted bail for Rosa Parks after she was arrested for refusing to go to the back of the bus.

Mrs. Durr, a friend of Parks, attended civil rights meetings and opened her home to out-of-state students who came to take part in voter registration drives.

She also visited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s home after it was firebombed.

In a statement, Parks, 86, said Mrs. Durr's "upbringing of privilege did not prohibit her from wanting equality for all people."

"She was a lady and a scholar, and I will miss her," Parks said.

Mrs. Durr wrote about her life, including accusations that she was a communist sympathizer, in the autobiography "Outside the Magic Circle."

In 1954, she was brought before Mississippi Democratic Sen. James O. Eastland's International Security Subcommittee, which corresponded to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Mrs. Durr testified that she was not a member of the Communist Party and that she had never been to any Communist Party meetings.

She remained active until her early nineties, speaking at colleges, to community groups and at civil rights commemorations. She moved to Carlisle from Montgomery, Ala., in 1997 to be closer to relatives.

Her husband died in 1975. Survivors include four daughters, Ann Durr Lyon of Harrisburg, Pa., Lucy Durr Hackney of Philadelphia, Virginia Foster Durr of Sweden, Maine, and Lulah Durr Colan of Milwaukee; 11 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.