

LOGANVILLE'S GREAT MATRIARCH

Story by Robbie Schwartz



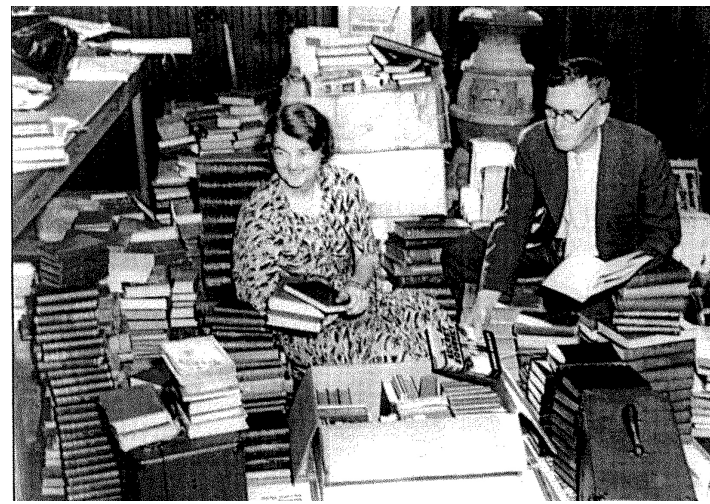
While Hoke D. O'Kelly is a name many have come to note in the pages of local history — as a philanthropist, former mayor, Purple Heart recipient as well as veteran of World War I and II, in addition to several failed attempts to win the governorship — serving as another testament to the family name was Willie D. O'Kelly Dubois.

"Willie D." — as she was affectionately known — was born on Feb. 12, 1893, in an area near Loganville known at the time as Waterport. She was one of seven children who all attended public school in Loganville and all of whom went on to attend college, despite the family having lost much of its standing during the Civil War save a little bit of land. Dubois attended Bessie Tift College and later Southern College in LaGrange, where she earned a bachelor's degree in 1913. She then went on to Columbia University, where from 1920 to 1924 she earned a second bachelor's degree as well as a master's degree, found time to study violin and on occasion perform at Loganville Methodist Church.

While she taught children of all ages during her lifetime, Dubois had her own thirst for knowledge that included working on her doctorate in history at the University of Wisconsin from 1927 to 1929. A family emergency forced her return to Loganville and while at home, a fire destroyed among a number of things including her dissertation research. She never completed her doctorate.

Miss O'Kelly, as she was also known for many years in the community, taught at grammar and high schools in the area in addition to a distinguished teaching career at the college level — from teaching political science at Georgia State Teacher's College for Women to serving as the head of the history department at Whitworth College in Brookhaven, Miss., and later at Queens College in Charlotte, N.C.

"The most important thing in my life are the boys and



A picture taken from the archives of the Gwinnett Historical Society showing Willie D. O'Kelly Dubois surrounded by books that would serve as the nucleus of Snellville's first library.

girls I have taught. I have students who live all over the United States and in foreign countries. The list includes students in agriculture, music, government, art, psychiatry, a Rhodes Scholar and two graduates from West Point," Dubois said in a published account. "I have no children except these wonderful ones."

She loved to travel, spending the summer of 1926 studying abroad in Europe researching "the living conditions among the so-called middle classes" as well as contemporary government. While her own personal history included many accolades, perhaps the most memorable was being selected to do research overseas for the Georgia Bicentennial Celebration Committee in 1932. For four months she did research in the House of Lords Library and Public Records Office as well as the British Museum Library on the Georgia's history, her findings later presented in *The Atlanta Constitution*.

Dubois did classified work in the Pentagon for the War Department during World War II and eventually returned home to care for her dying mother. Local historian Julian Sellers noted that she did this "unselfishly and at personal sacrifice, twice having to cancel marriage plans" to care for a family member. In addition, while her brother was in Europe fighting during World War II and spent two years in hospitals due to injuries suffered during the war, Dubois stepped in to help run her brother's farm — doing everything from gathering seeds to driving large equipment to Atlanta for repairs.

Sellers went on to say that while in Washington, D.C., Dubois reportedly befriended a young artist by the name of Norman Rockwell and during her time in New Jersey visited the laboratory of Thomas Edison. She was fortunate enough to have an audience with a pope and became acquainted with former president Jimmy Carter when he and her brother ran against Lester Maddox for governor. Dubois was also on hand when Eleanor



A photo from the May 17, 1984 edition of the *Gwinnett Daily News* showing Willie D. O'Kelly Dubois with the Purple Heart Award given posthumously to her brother, Hoke O'Kelly. More than a decade after his death, Dubois spent two years working on finding and filing the correct paperwork to honor her brother's service and sacrifice to his country in World War II.

Roosevelt dedicated the Rock Gym in Loganville.

It wasn't until she was 80 years old that Dubois married, falling in love with a Canadian transplant who she met through a mutual friend.

"It was big news all across town one Sunday morning that she had eloped," recalled Anne Jones, whose mother was a dear friend of Dubois. "She was 86 years old and practically blind, and he was certifiably deaf. But they made the perfect couple."

They lived in Loganville for years, where Dubois donated money and land for the O'Kelly Memorial Library. She would die in 1988, two years before the library was dedicated in her honor.

"You've heard about people who march to a different drum. Well, she didn't. She just marched — to whatever she wanted to march to," the Rev. Bob Willis said in a June 6, 1990 article of *The Walton Tribune* on the library's dedication ceremony. "She was different and I appreciate that so much about her. She would not compromise her beliefs for anything."

"She dedicated her life to serving others and making things better for humanity. I think that everyone who met her was a little bit richer for having crossed her path." **L**

— Special thanks to local historian Kent Henderson whose research was the basis for this story.