

Widow of artist Tom Lea dies at age 96

By Stephanie Sanchez

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Sarah Catherine Dighton Lea, the first woman to become a bank director in 1974 in El Paso and widow of celebrated artist Tom Lea, died Friday of a heart attack. She was 96.

Sarah Lea, who was born in Monticello, Ill., went to the University of Illinois and worked as a bookkeeper for the First National Bank of Monticello. After moving to El Paso, she was named to the board of directors of the State National Bank in El Paso in 1974, said her granddaughter Catherine Ann Lea Faldyn.

"She had been in El Paso since 1938. ... (Tom Lea) was a native of El Paso, she came to visit from Monticello, Ill.," Faldyn said, adding that the two wed the same year. "It was love at first sight with them. Everybody who met her loved her. She was a genuine, lovely lady and her smile could light up a room."



S. Lea

Tom Lea, whose artwork has been displayed at the Smithsonian Institution, the Pentagon, the Texas Governor's Mansion and in the White House Oval Office, died from complications to injuries he suffered from a fall in 2001, Faldyn said.

"She talked about him, all the good things (about him). She missed him," she said. "That was her one true love. It is very rare to find that and their love is an inspiration to others. I'm happy she and my grandfather are back together."

Faldyn said her grandmother was the president of many El Paso organizations including the YWCA, United Way, the Junior League, Family Service of El Paso, El Paso Council on Aging, and Traveler's Aid.

In 1974, she became the first woman president of the El Paso United Way, she said.

El Paso officials have honored Sarah Lea for her dedication to several organizations including the Texas Women: A Celebration of History exhibit in 1982 and a YWCA building was dedicated and named after her in 1988.

Lea is survived by her son, James Dighton Lea; her granddaughter, Catherine Ann Lea Faldyn; and three great-grandsons.

A memorial service will be at 3 p.m. Tuesday at the First Presbyterian Church, 1340 Murchison. Flowers and contributions may be made to any El Paso YWCA, the American Red Cross Association in El Paso, or The United Way of El Paso County.

LEA

Sarah Catherine Dighton Lea, beloved wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, passed away on Friday, May 2, 2008, at the age of 96. She was born on January 6, 1912, in Monticello, Illinois to Andrew Jackson Dighton and Pearle Noecker Dighton. She attended the University of Illinois and worked as a bookkeeper for the First National Bank of Monticello. While visiting friends in El Paso, Texas in 1938, she met artist Tom Lea. They were married in July 1938.

Sarah is preceded in death by her husband of 63 years, Tom Lea, and her granddaughter Sarah Jane Lea. She is survived by her son, James Dighton Lea and his wife, Doris Walker Lea of Houston; her granddaughter Catherine Ann Lea Faldyn of Houston; her great-grandsons, Curtis Daniel Faldyn, Thomas Lea Faldyn and Stephen James Faldyn, all of Houston; and numerous nieces and nephews.

Sarah was an active volunteer and prominent leader in business, civic and welfare activities in El Paso. In 1974, she became the first woman bank director in El Paso when she was named to the board of directors of the State National Bank. She also served on the board of the Pleasant View Home for Senior Citizens, City-County Child Welfare Unit, El Paso Rehabilitation Unit, El Paso Council on Alcoholism, City Recreation Department, El Paso Chapter of Texas Social Family Welfare Association, the Salvation Army and American Red Cross, and as a trustee of the Lee and Beulah Moor Children's Home.

She served as president of many local organizations such as the YWCA, the United Way, the Junior League, Family Service of El Paso, El Paso Council on Aging, and Traveler's Aid. In 1974, she became the first woman president of the El Paso United Way. She was the co-chairman of the Texas State Volunteer Conference in 1980.

She has been an active member and officer of many organizations

and committees. From 1987-1991, she served on the Friends of the Governors Mansion's Committee. She was a member of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Bi-National Governors Conference, the El Paso City Building and Safety Inspection Board, the West Texas Area Advisory Committee on Aging and the Governors Advisory Committee on Aging. She was a member of the Pan American Round Table, the Symphony Association, and Las Comadres. She served as a volunteer at the Special Collections Department of the UTEP library.

Sarah's many honors and awards included the Hannah G. Solomon Award in 1971 from the El Paso Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. The National Conference of Christians and Jews honored her with its National Award for distinguished service in 1977. She was named the First Lady for 1973 by the El Paso Council of Beta Sigma Phi. The City of El Paso honored her with its Conquistador Award in 1977 as an outstanding community leader. In 1982, she was honored for her distinguished leadership in the Texas Women: A Celebration of History exhibit in El Paso. In 1988, the YWCA dedicated the Sarah D. Lea Building in her honor.

A memorial service will be held on Tuesday, May 6, 2008 at 3:00 PM at the First Presbyterian Church, 1340 Murchison. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to YWCA, the American Red Cross Association, or the United Way. The family would like to thank Sarah's caregivers, Martha and Francesca, for all the years of their compassionate and loving care that they gave Sarah. Services entrusted to Harding Orr and McDaniel Funeral Home, 320 Montana Ave.

