

Dr. Mary Lou Byrd Cowan

Born: December 16, 1911

Death: September 29, 1994

Mary Lou Byrd was born in Asheville, NC, but when she was two years old, her family moved to New York City. Her father, Thomas F. Byrd, was from Burnsville, NC, which is located in the mountains near the Blue Ridge Parkway near Mt. Mitchell. No mention was made of her mother in this interview.

From Kindergarten through fourth grade, Mary Lou attended a Quaker school, Friends Seminary, which was across the street from the family's apartment. She spent her summers on a 250-acre farm that her father had purchased in Dutchess County, near Pawling Wingdale, NY. On the farm, Mary Lou said she learned to raise vegetables and mild cows. She was the oldest of three children. Her brother was 18 months younger, and her sister was 7 years younger.

After she graduated from high school, Mary Lou went to Tusculum College, in east Tennessee, from which her father had graduated. Then, she transferred to New York University Washington Square College. At that time, the country was in the Great Depression, and Mary Lou received financial aid from the college. In 1931, she earned her Bachelor of Science degree.

From there, Mary Lou went to New York University School of Medicine, in lower Manhattan, which was affiliated with Bellevue Hospital. In June 1935, she graduated with her medical degree, one of five women in a class of one hundred. She then received an appointment or medical/surgical internship at Bellevue Hospital for one year. During the next year and a half, she completed an assistant surgical residency at Bellevue. Finally, for the next three years, she was appointed as an anesthesia resident in Dr. E. A. Rovenstine's program. According to Mary Lou, at the time he was a pioneer in the field of anesthesia. In 1941, she completed her formal education.

Mary Lou heard about a position at Butterworth Hospital, in Grand Rapids, MI, "through a salesman who sold anesthetic equipment . . . [and] was familiar with Butterworth Hospital and . . . the superintendent of the hospital, Dr. Ragsdale, who was interested in having an anesthesiologist come to Butterworth . . ., which at that time was only 220 – 240 beds," explained Mary. At that time the doctors and nurses were self-taught in anesthesiology and took turns performing that surgical function. "I was expected to supervise the nurses and have a practice [and be] a consultant to the physicians who [practiced anesthesiology] part time."

In 1941, Mary Lou moved to Grand Rapids. She "felt that [she] had a better opportunity to enjoy what [she] wanted to do [e.g., live in a city and still have a yard and a garden]." In April 1944 (check date), Mary Lou married the "ether salesman," Robert Bruce Cowan, who had encouraged her to move to Grand Rapids. The country had entered WWII, and Cowan had enlisted in the Army. When he was in town on a leave of absence, the couple was married.

“Eventually, [Cowan] went to officers training school and served in the chemical warfare department, but he never went overseas,” said Mary Lou.

Mary Lou stayed at Butterworth Hospital and practice. She “kept busy.” On April 4, 1945, she gave birth to Bruce Robert Cowan, Jr. Three or four months later, her husband “mustered out of the Army.” In 1965, he died of a heart attack.

Mary Lou described her husband as a “participating father.” He was also a builder and an insurance agent. In 1951, the couple welcomed a daughter, Mary Jane Cowan. “The day she was delivered, I’d done some work . . . at the hospital,” said Mary Lou. She did acknowledge that after she had stayed home for 2 weeks, she had help to take care of her new baby girl at home. At the time of this interview, Mary Lou had one grandson whom her son and his wife had adopted.

From 1941 – 1959, Mary Lou was the director of anesthesia. Among her accomplishments was starting a residency program, teaching student nurses, and lecturing interns. In 1981, Mary Lou retired. At the time of this interview, she was the unofficial “historian” of the Butterworth Medical Alumni. “It never really got off the ground too well; however, a master list of the former interns and residents at Butterworth was prepared with their addresses,” said Mary Lou. She then kept that list up to date, which at that time included 600 living physicians.

During her career, Mary Lou was affiliated with the Michigan Society of Anesthesiologists. She was its secretary/treasurer “for quite some time” and president “for one year.” She also served on various committees at the state level. She was a “delegate” when the American Society of Anesthesiologists first started its “house of delegates” and served in that capacity for 3 – 4 years. In 1942, she was “asked to be a guest examiner for the orals of the American Board of Anesthesiologists, emphasis guest examiner. I never served on the board. That [was] a big difference.” Her other interests included the Grand Rapids Symphony (she was a subscriber for 20 years), St. Cecilia, Women’s City Club, American Association of University Women (she was president from 1944 to 1946 and an honorary member, contributing for over 50 years), and the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

After her father died in 1973, for a number of years, Mary Lou spent 2 months in the summer at an old, two-storey log house that her father had found and rebuilt in the North Carolina mountains. He had called the parcel of land “Rhododendron Park.” Mary Lou had managed other land that she and her siblings had inherited from their father, but she had sold it.

When asked to reflect on her career, Mary Lou said that she had found satisfaction in watching the practice of anesthesiology “from the early days of gas and ether and then . . . growing into the use of intravenous anesthetics to make a pleasant induction of adults and then other anesthetic agents. . . . And so now we have a subspecialty in anesthesia of pain clinics and physicians who are anesthesiologists who only devote their practice to pain.”

Finally, her accomplishments have inspired others in her family to become doctors. Her sister’s middle child, Cynthiane Judith, has followed in her aunt’s footsteps and has become an anesthesiologist. She married an ophthalmologist. Mary Lou’s nephew, her brother’s son, also became a doctor (of infectious diseases), and he married another doctor.

Other Resources: