

Prominent Fairbanks businesswoman and political activist Helenka M. Brice died Saturday night at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. She was 83.



BRICE
(1984 photo)

Mrs. Brice entered the clinic April 3 following surgery. She died from complications stemming from that surgery, according to her granddaughter, Jennifer Brice.

"She was too old and frail to make it through the surgery," Jennifer said.

Mrs. Brice's son, L.A. Brice, his wife Carol, and daughter Lorena Fouts were at her side when she passed away in her sleep, Jennifer Brice said.

"It was not completely unexpected," she said.

Mrs. Brice and her husband, Luther, moved to Fairbanks in 1957. In 1961 the couple, along with their four sons, founded the construction firm Brice Inc. At the time of her death, Mrs. Brice was president and chief executive officer of the company.

Prior to moving to Alaska, she worked as a reporter for the Associated Press and as a radio reporter. She raised seven children.

She was firmly established as the powerful matriarch of the large Brice family, according to her granddaughter.

"Having her gone means reconfiguring the whole family," Jennifer Brice said. "She was the centrifugal force of this family."

State Rep. Tom Moyer, D-Fairbanks, remembered Mrs. Brice as a positive thinker and one of the most vibrant women he ever knew. "She was the matriarch of Democratic politics in the Interior. If you were thinking of running for office, the first thing you needed to do was go see Helenka."

Moyer said he was introduced to Brice through the late Sen. Bettye Fahrenkamp of Fairbanks. "They were quite a pair, those two," he said.

"She was a beautiful and unusual person," said Helen Frank, a friend of Brice. "It's the end of an era with her."

Frank remembered Brice for her ability to get people to donate money.

"She was always able to get oil companies and others to donate," Frank said. Brice convinced oil companies to donate to the summer arts festival and the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she said.

Frank also remembered Brice for her roses.

"She grew beautiful roses and she loved giving them away," Frank said.

Frank's husband, Conrad, remembered Brice as a competitor in the contracting business, and said she had "tremendous forthrightness and was a very hard worker."

"She was an outgoing person and very supportive of the community," Conrad Frank said. "She left a very, very fine company with a good legacy."