

SNELLVILLE

Ralph C. Elam, 76, ex-DeKalb cop, former Stone Mountain police chief

By KAY POWELL
kpowell@ajc.com

4/14/02

Growing up on the Atlanta Prison Farm, where his father was a guard, determined Ralph C. Elam's life work. He was in law enforcement from the time he left the U.S. Army after World War II until his final retirement in 1987.

Mr. Elam was with the DeKalb County Police Department from 1947 to 1966. After serving as police chief in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., he returned as director of security for the DeKalb County Board of Education from 1971 to 1985. He rounded out his career serving eight months as Stone Mountain's police chief before retiring in 1987, said his son Jason Elam of Braselton.

A small man at 5 feet 7 inches and 150 pounds, Mr. Elam had to talk his way into being hired by the DeKalb police chief, said his son. His first night on the job, officers dropped him off to patrol the worst part of the county. Before his shift was over, Mr. Elam had stopped a fight and turned to the nearest fire station for assistance in the arrest.

"He walked these two enormous people into the fire station looking for help," said



Ralph Elam asked that a card saying "Wish You Were Here" be placed on his chest.

his son. "He didn't have enough handcuffs for both of them and got them to walk with him to the station.

"He wasn't scared of a whole lot."

The funeral for Mr. Elam, 76, who died of a heart attack at his Snellville residence Friday, is at 2 p.m. today at Tom M. Wages, Snellville Chapel.

Mr. Elam began his career when it was common for bootleggers and moonshiners to smuggle illegal whiskey into the metro area. He often told stories of "chasing liquor cars, hanging out the window and shooting at the cars, just like in the movies," said his son.

He had to quit the DeKalb police job when, driving to work one day, his automobile was hit by a stolen car.

"It broke his back, but he actually got out of the car and chased the guy down and caught him," said his son.

Mr. Elam developed and administered the security system for DeKalb County schools, added his son, who is the place-kicker for the Denver Broncos football team.

During his short stint as Stone Mountain police chief, Mr. Elam promoted using radar to catch speeders. He successfully pushed a plan to close the city's jail and build holding cells near the police dispatch area to increase efficiency and reduce insurance costs.

Elam Forest, a subdivision built on his family's farm, and Elam Road in DeKalb County are named for his family.

Mr. Elam was a stern parent with a sense of humor, said his son.

"He was always the life of the party. He was a prankster. He liked to make people laugh," said his son.

The family honored his father's request that when he died, an index card be placed on his chest reading, "Wish you were here," said his son.

Survivors include his wife, Evelyn Elam; two other sons, Ralph Carlton Elam Jr. of Blue Ridge and Mark Gordon Elam of Springfield, Va.; a sister, Janie Swinney of Stockbridge; and two grandchildren.