

A pioneering muse to the very end - Anchorage arts patron and musician dies at 100 LORENE HARRISON: 1905-2005

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Lorene Harrison, doyenne of the Anchorage arts community, died Friday morning at 10:45 in her room at the Anchorage Pioneers' Home, her daughter, Carol Anne Dodd, at her side.

She was 100 years old, and had been a resident of the state nearly continuously since 1928, when she arrived by train. She came to the state as a 23-year-old graduate of Sterling College in Kansas to teach Alaskans music. She ended up teaching quite a lot more than that.

If there was a significant cultural event in Anchorage during the last 77 years, odds are Lorene Harrison either conceived it, planned it, taught the musicians who performed in it, founded the organization that sponsored it, raised money for it, volunteered her time to bring it off, attended it, or had a hand in its staging.

She worked with nearly every musical organization in the city, including the USO during World War II, the Anchorage Concert Chorus -- which she founded the year after the war ended and directed for three years -- the Anchorage Opera, the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra, the Anchorage Concert Association, and many more.

In an obituary written about her and filed for future use in the archives of the Anchorage Times in 1986 -- 19 years prematurely, as it happened -- she is quoted as saying: "I quickly became 'the musician' of Anchorage, singing at every wedding and funeral and teaching private piano and voice lessons." Not so hard to understand, since on her arrival Anchorage had only 2,500 residents, and six high school teachers.

Her activities in the state's cultural demimonde brought her into contact -- and friendship -- with musical luminaries from around the world.

"Where else but Alaska could a small-town music teacher have the opportunity to be friends with the world's greatest musicians?" she once said. Through the years, the houseguests she entertained at her home at 10th Avenue and N Street, overlooking the Delaney Park Strip, included Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, George Szell, Marilyn Horne, Van Cliburn, Isaac Stern, Fred Waring and many others.

Harrison was a world traveler and ambassador for the state whose travels and works are recorded in the Anchorage Times' and Daily News' library in endless column inches, memorial programs, rolls of board members, notices of honors and pictures of her at the helm of "Lorene's," the women's clothing business she operated for 30 years, from which she sold the trademark hats she designed.

The lobby of the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts was named in her honor, and earlier this year her 100th birthday was celebrated at the PAC with a gala concert that filled the Atwood Concert Hall to the rafters.

"We would take her to all the performances of the symphony or the concert chorus," says John Brower, former chair of both the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the Anchorage Arts Advisory Commission and current chair of the Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation.

"We would park her wheelchair -- in the Lorene Harrison Lobby, no less -- and it used to amuse me, the number of people who would come up and talk to her and treat her like a queen. To my mind, she was an artist and performer right up to the day she died. We decided a little over a year ago to honor her with an event at the PAC for her 100th birthday, and (Anchorage Concert Chorus director) Grant (Cochran) put the thing together. She would call me up constantly, though, and she always had another story to tell me, and something else she wanted us to do. Finally, I said, 'Lorene, you have to listen to me: This performance is for you, it is about you, it is honoring you, but it is not by you.' It was just her nature; she was a performer, and director, and she needed to be involved."

Grant Cochran has similar memories of Harrison's effect on the music scene in Anchorage. He remembers her as "very motherly, but exacting. Very, very demanding."

"She came on the scene when there really was not much happening in the way of the arts here," he says. "She was just such an energetic, passionate person. And perhaps a little restless. I think that's what led her to be involved in so much in the beginnings of Anchorage's cultural scene. If she saw a void, she was the sort of person who would just say 'Well, let's just do something about that.' "