

Barbara Cowles, Tulsa Philharmonic cellist, dies

TIM STANLEY World Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, February 6, 2011 12:00 am

The Tulsa Philharmonic Orchestra had come a long way since Barbara Cowles first joined it in 1950.

"The quality is better now, and the average age is younger," Cowles, who played the cello, proudly informed the Tulsa World in 1994.

She was sure, she added with a smile, that the average age would drop even more with her departure.

After 44 years playing for Philharmonic audiences, making her officially the group's longest continuously serving member, the 65-year-old had decided the time had finally come to retire.

Her fingers weren't as nimble on the strings, she noted, and her hearing wasn't quite as good as it had been.

At her final Philharmonic performance in 1994, Cowles, who had started playing the cello as a third-grader in Iowa, was recognized for her record of service.

The shy cellist, who normally did her best to blend in with her fellow musicians, confessed to being a little embarrassed by the attention, but she accepted it graciously.

A native of Early, Iowa, who had started with the Tulsa Philharmonic in only its second full season, Barbara Jean Cowles died Jan. 27 of complications from pancreatic cancer. She was 82. A funeral service was held Jan. 31 at St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Moore's Memory Funeral Home handled arrangements.

Barbara Cowles moved to Tulsa as a young college graduate to play for the Philharmonic while she pursued her master's in music at the University of Tulsa.

Her musician's salary of about \$900 a year went toward expenses while she lived on campus and



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Barbara Cowles, a 40-year veteran of the Tulsa Philharmonic Orchestra, poses in her living room with her vintage cello in 1998.

MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World file

worked on her degree.

It allowed her about \$1 a day for meals and "even in the '50s, that was not too much," she said.

Later, she married Clayton Cowles, moved to Brookside and started a family, which would grow to include four children.

For years, Barbara Cowles' daily schedule stayed pretty much the same: Every afternoon, she gave music lessons to Tulsa Public Schools students in piano and cello. Afterward, she made a good dinner for her family.

Then, come evening, it was off to make music.

The orchestra, which started in 1949, met as many as five times a week; performances were held at what is now the Brady Theater, before later moving to the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

During her four-plus decades with the group, which also provided music for Tulsa Opera and Tulsa Ballet, Cowles played her cello for original Philharmonic conductor H. Arthur Brown and a succession of others, concluding with Bernard Rubenstein.

Former Philharmonic president Rodger Randle called Barbara Cowles "a symbol of the dedication of the musicians and professionals that made the Philharmonic's success possible.

"For Barbara to have been a part of the Philharmonic for so long, which was nationally known and a keystone of Tulsa cultural life for generations, was an outstanding testament to her musical skills and dedication to Tulsa," Randle said.

Cowles was a member of the venerable Hyeckka Club of Tulsa; after retiring from the Philharmonic she continued to perform publicly for the group's programs. She also sat on a club committee for music scholarships.

Cowles was introduced to music by her mother, who began teaching her piano at age 5. Before moving to Tulsa, Cowles completed a degree in music at Morningside College in Iowa.

She is survived by sons Terry Cowles, Ron Cowles and Randy Cowles; daughter Melissa Cowles; four grandchildren; sister Carol Rutledge and brother Leon Brewer.

Original Print Headline: Longtime Tulsa cellist orchestrated a harmonious life