



Cellist Plays With Distinction // Philharmonic Loses 44-Year Veteran

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Laureen Gibson Gilroy | Posted May 31, 1994

Barbara Cowles left her native Iowa to study music at the University of Tulsa and play cello with Tulsa's fledgling orchestra.

Forty-four years later, Cowles retired from the Tulsa Philharmonic as the musician with the longest continuous service with the 45-year-old orchestra.

During last Thursday's performance at Utica Square, stagehand Lee Putnam presented a dozen, long-stemmed red roses to the shy cellist.

"That was a complete surprise," Cowles said later during an interview in her Jenks home.

"It's nice, but it's kind of embarrassing."

As it turned out, orchestra members tricked the stagehand into delivering the flowers so he would be onstage when they announced Putnam's retirement after more than 20 years with the Philharmonic.

Cowles, 65, said the orchestra has changed a lot since she joined it in 1950.

"The quality is better, and the average age is younger," she said. "I'm sure it will be even younger when I leave!"

Cowles said she still enjoys playing with the Philharmonic,

but she also looks forward to retirement.

"I'll be 66, and I think it's about time. The fingers aren't as nimble, and the ears aren't as good," she said.

But Cowles is healthy enough to travel around the world.

She went to Spain, Portugal and Scandinavia last year. This summer, she will take a cruise to Alaska.

During her younger days in Iowa, Cowles was not so well-traveled.

She had never seen Oklahoma when she decided to move to

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Her salary of less than \$900 a year as a musician helped cover expenses while she pursued a master's degree at TU.

"I had a dollar a day for eating. Even in the '50s, that was not too much," she said.

She lived in the brand new Lottie Jane Mabee Hall on campus.

Back then, most of the Philharmonic's performances were at Convention Hall, now called the Brady Theater, 105 W. Brady St.

Barbara later married Clayton Cowles and moved to Brookside, where the couple raised four children.

Cowles continued her musical career. She gave private piano and cello lessons to Tulsa Public Schools students in the afternoon, fixed supper for her family, then went to Philharmonic rehearsals or performances. At times, the orchestra met as many as five times a week.

Cowles said she had two or three really good students, including a 6-year-old boy who was extremely talented.

"All of a sudden he started doing poorly at it," Cowles said. The boy soon quit taking lessons.

Cowles investigated and found out the boy's housekeeper told him playing piano would turn him into a "sissy."

She wonders if the boy ever went back to playing the piano.

"He wanted to do well and had the talent. It's just a shame,"

Cowles said.

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