

Grand and full of art, Mildred Owen had a heart as big as Texas

Written by Jean Bartlett, December, 2017
(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)

"Mildred Owen was a force of nature," said Morning Nichols, Artistic Director of Pacifica Performances, "as an advocate for the arts and the environment, a social activist, a teacher and a singer in her own right. She remains an inspiration for so many who continue to hold her in their hearts."

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### **OWEN, MILDRED ANN SIMON THOMPSON (1927-2009)**

On December 20, 1927, Mildred Ann Simon Thompson Owen was born in Giddings, Texas, a small town just 55 miles east of Austin. Her parents were Alvin Z. Owen, Sr. and Mabel Marie (Burr) Owen of Pasadena, Texas. She was the granddaughter of Thomas Eugene Owen and Celia (Stephens) Owen of Leonard, Texas, and Rev. William Winchester Burr and Lena (Reaves) Burr of Houston, Texas. Her father AZ came across the prairies via a covered wagon when he was 5. He walked.

"My dad was an instructor in the Giddings School system and my mother taught piano when Mildred was born," said Mildred's brother, Alvin Z. Owen, Jr., who is just 16 days shy of being exactly four years younger than his big sister. "Both of my parents graduated from Baylor University in 1924, one with an education degree and the other with a mathematics degree. In either 1929 or 1930, the family moved to Liberty, Texas and Dad was the Liberty High School principal." (Liberty is approximately 43 miles from Houston. Alvin, Jr., was born in Houston in 1931.)

"In about 1938, Dad resigned his position with the school system and took a position with the US Post Office – a better paying job. In 1940,

he took a transfer to the Pasadena, Texas Post Office. I was in the 6th grade and Mildred was in the 10th grade. Mildred graduated from Pasadena High School in the spring of 1943 and entered Baylor University in the fall of that year. She graduated in 1947."

Mildred majored in music education at Baylor and minored in voice. Her brother noted that she was a member of several of the choirs and had parts in various operas. By that point, Mildred already had a long history with music.

"Mildred and I were brought up listening, playing, and singing classical music," Alvin said. "Mother took us to numerous musical events – operas and symphonies – where we appreciated the music of the masters."

Her mother taught her piano as did Mildred's favorite aunt, Ruth Burr. Ruth Burr, born in 1890, was considered to be a piano virtuoso in her own right. *Houston Chronicle* journalist legend Tom Mulvany wrote about Ruth in June of 1970.

*"Fontainebleau has its Nadia Boulanger, New York City's Juilliard School of Music has its Rosina Lhévinne – and Houston has its Ruth G. Burr. They have in common a potential for piano virtuosity at a very high level but have, instead, dedicated their musical greatness to the art of teaching, of drawing out the potential greatness in others."*

The list of pianists Ruth Burr helped develop is unparalleled. It includes: Jacques Abram, Ruth Elizabeth Robbins Tomfohrde, conductor Victor Alessandro, and Gayle Martin Henry. She additionally published four books on piano technique. The year following her death in 1989, the Houston Tuesday Musical Club established the first Ruth Burr Awards Competition. The prestigious competition is still going.



**Music teacher (and Mildred's aunt) Ruth Burr.**



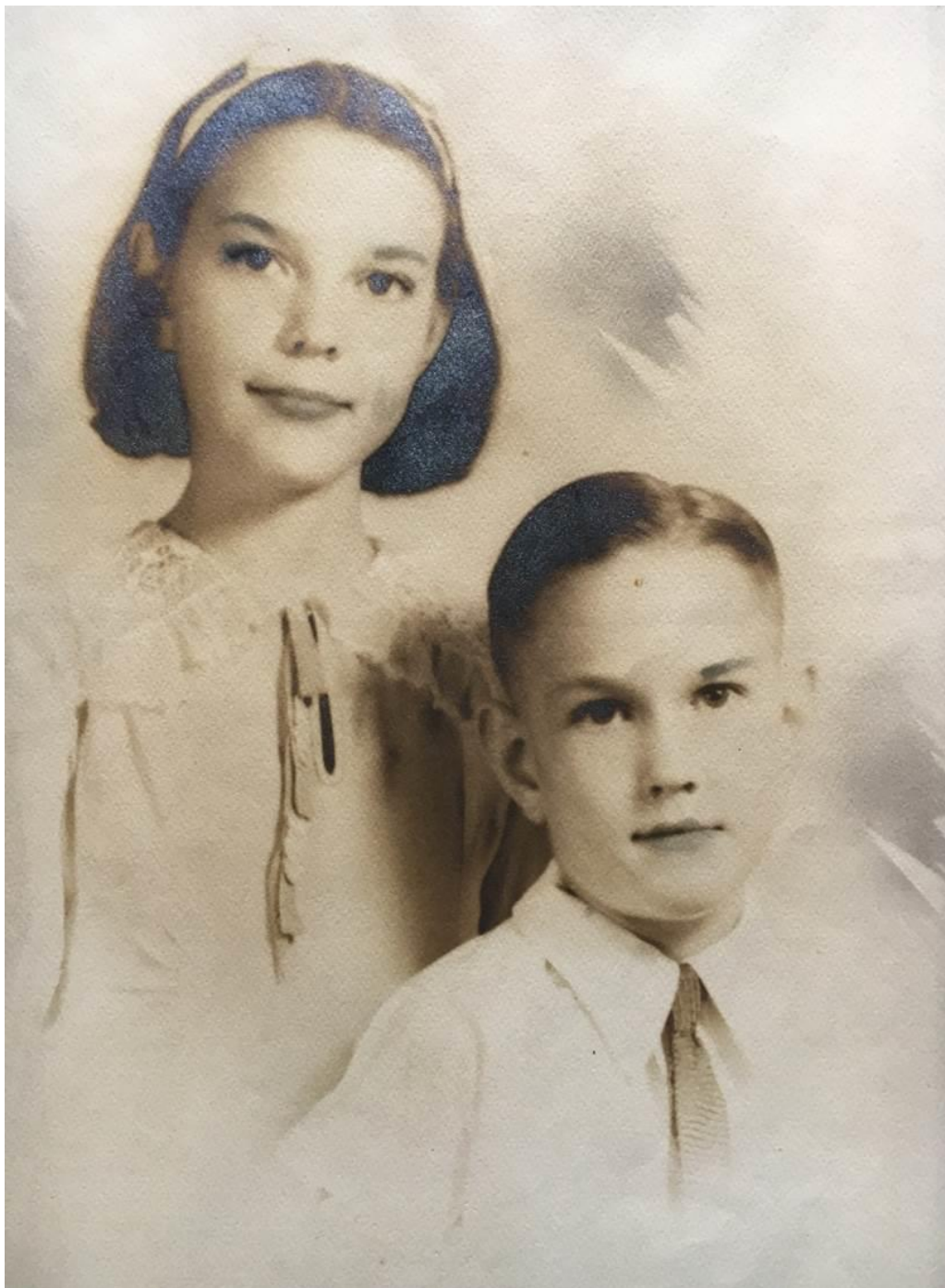
**Music major Mildred Owen at Baylor University.**

Ruth Burr was not the only famous "Burr" on Mildred's mother's side.

"We are the 7th generation relations to Aaron Burr, the famous Vice President," said Mildred's daughter, Barbara Simon. "Aaron Burr was the second cousin of William Winchester Burr, Mabel Marie Burr's father, and my mother's grandfather."

Born in 1756, Aaron Burr was the third US Vice President. He served under President Thomas Jefferson. In June of 1804, he fatally shot his rival, Statesman and Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, in a duel. While all charges against Aaron Burr were eventually dropped, the death of his rival ended his political career. History writers have not always been kind to Aaron Burr. But research shows he served as a Continental Army officer in the Revolutionary War and received a commendation from Congress for "Courage Under Fire." In addition, he believed that women were the intellectual equals of men – certainly evidenced in the way he raised his daughter, Theodosia. By the age of 3, she could read and write and was given all the same educational tools in language, math, history and geography as her brother. This type of thinking was extremely unpopular at that time and not at all supported by Alexander Hamilton.

"With typical brother-sister relations, I didn't pay much attention to Mildred's activities in high school or college," Mildred's brother noted. "Mother tried to teach me how to play the piano at different times during my public school years to no avail. The music school at Baylor also tried for four years to no avail. My parents bought me a clarinet when I was 10 and I played that all through public school and Baylor University. I had to shelve the clarinet during my US Air Force career, but am now, at age 86, playing in a community band, Baylor Alumni Band and several small groups."



**Mildred, 10, and her brother Alvin, 6, in Liberty, Texas, 1937.**





**Mildred's father, Alvin Z. Owen, Sr.**



**Mildred's mother, Mable Marie Burr Owen.**

After Mildred graduated from Baylor, she moved to Sugar Land, Texas, and taught music in the public school.

"I don't know how long she taught at Sugar Land," Alvin noted, "but it did not satisfy her ambition as a musician and soon she headed to New York to further her music studies at Columbia University and at the Juilliard School of Music."

Mildred met her first husband George Stanley Simon while attending Columbia, at a party given by the Sorority Mom who just happened to be George's stepmom.

"Mom told all the other girls to stay away as she had claims!" Barbara laughed. "We found wonderful love letters between them, very sweet."

Born in Germany, George was Jewish and lost a great many of his relatives to the Holocaust. Because of that, George was never much given to attending synagogue, except for weddings.

On April 10, 1954, George and Mildred married in Pasadena, TX. Shortly thereafter, George got a job in Little Rock, Arkansas and off they went. On a business trip to San Francisco, George returned to Little Rock and said, "Honey, we're moving." Not long after the couple moved to San Francisco, their first daughter Shelley was born. Their second daughter Barbara was also born in San Francisco. In 1959, the family can be found in a San Francisco Directory at: 254 17th Avenue. George is listed as a salesman for the Paul Koss Supply Company.



**Shelley, George and Mildred, late 1955 or early 1956, in San Francisco.**

In 1961, the Simon family moved to Daly City, CA, where their third child, son Frank, was born. In 1963, the family moved to Pacifica, CA. They lived in Pacifica's Vallemar neighborhood first and then bought a home in the Linda Mar area, which the family still owns.



**Clockwise from top left: Mildred, George, Frank, 3 months, Barbara, 4-1/2, and Shelley, 6-1/2, August 1961.**

Barbara said her mother always sang, always performed and always taught music. As a performer, she was often featured in the *Arts Section* of the *San Mateo Times*. When the San Francisco Opera Workshop performed Engelbert Humperdinck's fairy tale opera "Hansel and Gretel" in Pacifica, March of 1968, mezzo-soprano Mildred sang the role of The Gingerbread Witch. In November of 1970, Mildred climbed aboard the Pacifica Spindrift Players' stage in the Aubrey Lumley production of Gian Carlo Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors." It was a cast of more than 40, and Mildred and her son Frank were in the lead roles of Amahl and his widowed mother.



**In concert: Dale Emde, Mildred Owen, Onnie Taylor and unidentified fellow performer.**

Mildred's abbreviated Bay Area performance résumé includes: she was a member of the New Opera Quartet and performed with the East Bay Opera League, the Lamplighters Repertory Company, the Opera West Foundation, Opera Cameos and the Children's Theater Association. As a soloist she performed with the San Jose Opera, Santa Rosa Opera, San Francisco Spring Opera, Carmel Bach Festival, Inverness Music Festival and various other choirs and symphonies throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

*San Mateo Time* arts writer Robert Burmister reviewed Mildred's two performances in a Skyline College presentation of two one-act comic operas: Menotti's "The Old Maid and the Thief" and Giacomo Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi."

"Mildred Owen took the lead role of Miss Todd in the Menotti opera," Burmister wrote, "as well as the important part of Aunt Zita in the Puccini piece. Everything about her singing ability was superior — diction, intonation, tone control and projection. Though a mezzo, she had the mobility and pinpoint focus of a soprano."

In September of 1973, Mildred's husband George died quite unexpectedly. It was an extremely sad time for the family but Mildred did what she always did, put one foot in front of the other and charged forth and found the sun.

In the years following George's death, you can find Mildred again in various *San Mateo Times* write-ups, including: guest artist Mildred Owen joins in the San Mateo County Choral Society's evening of French Choral Music; as one of the soloists with the College of San Mateo Masterworks Chorale and the College Community Orchestra presentation of Joseph Haydn's "Missa Solemnis;" and as a featured artist in the College of San Mateo hosted, San Mateo County Chamber Music Society sponsored, Artists-In-Residence Concerts which featured works by resident composers Frank Van West, William MacSems, Peter Sacco and Emanuel Leplin.

Mildred also taught music at Skyline College and Mills College and by the time she and Pacifican Clay Thompson started dating in the late 1980s, she was teaching 30 vocal students a week. While the following is excerpted from an interview I did with members of Mildred's family following her sudden death on Thursday, March 26, 2009, it is used here primarily, to highlight the journey that brought Mildred and Clay's paths together.



## Arts community loses a champion Pacifans bid farewell to their one-of-a-kind Mildred Owen

By **JEAN BARTLETT** | Pacifica Tribune

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*Mildred Owen, Artistic Director of Pacifica Performances, music educator, opera singer, diligent recycler, trip planner and tour escort, concerned citizen, motivator, wife, mom, grandmother, dear friend, the first recipient of the City of Pacifica's Lifetime Achievement Award (in 1996) and beautiful woman inside and out – died quite suddenly at home on Thursday, March 26. She was 81 on paper but for those of us who tried to keep her pace within our sights, she was and will be forever young.*

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*Clay Thompson, his first wife, their son Mike and their daughter Pat, lived down the street from Mildred and her family. Mildred's daughter Barbara and Clay's daughter Pat met in junior high in 1968 and became friends. The parents were friendly acquaintances through school functions and the neighborhood association. When Mildred's husband died, Clay's wife brought meals over and offered sympathy.*

*Clay's daughter Pat said the first time she heard Mildred sing, she liked her. It was during a kid's outing to the opera "Hansel and Gretel." Mildred played the witch. Sometimes after that, Pat would hear Mildred's mezzo-soprano carried through the neighborhood backyards and Pat found Mildred and her singing, enchanting.*

*In August of 1983, Clay's wife died. Several years later Pat had this idea that her dad and Mildred should get together.*

*"I had really gotten to know Mildred because Mildred was famous for taking in strays and at one point in my life, I was one of the strays she took in," Pat said. "Somewhere in there it occurred to me that it wouldn't be so bad if she and my dad dated."*

*Mildred had it in her mind that she was going to set Clay up with a friend who had just lost her husband. But Pat arranged an "innocent" little set up and later Mildred would tell Pat: "I looked at Clay and thought, wait a minute. I think I want this one."*



*Clay and Mildred married in January of 1990. They had planned the date in advance and it turned out it was Super Bowl Sunday. "We knew how much people loved us when they showed up at our wedding and reception," Clay laughed. Mildred's dear friend from Baylor, Mary Leland, played violin at their wedding, and Clay said their wedding day was beautiful.*



Mildred was there at the beginning, 1976, when the Pacifica Arts and Heritage Council formed. All volunteers, they created Sunday jazz concerts at Pacifica's Pedro Point Firehouse on an intermittent basis. The concerts slowed a bit when PAHC moved to St. Edmund's Church. When PAHC moved to Pacifica's Community Center, Mildred became the volunteer-in-charge of the classical concerts and trumpeter Lionel Emde booked the jazz concerts.

In 1997, with a lot of drive and a lot of hands-on work from Mildred and so many in the community, including Mildred's husband Clay, PAHC moved into its permanent home in the Sanchez Concert Hall, located in Pacifica's Sanchez Art Center. Mildred saw the Center as a major cultural arts facility, bringing in audiences locally and from over the hill. In 2001, PAHC became Pacifica Performances.

When Pacifica Performances first Artistic Director was not at the Concert Hall, she took tour groups to Oaxaca, Mexico – 20 years of tours. While in Oaxaca, Mildred met and admired the work of artisan Jacobo Angeles Ojeda. Next thing you know Jacobo was in Pacifica, demonstrating and selling his art. When she and Clay took a trip to Russia, Mildred met and admired classical guitarist Yury Nugmanov, a soloist with the Moscow State Philharmonia. Yury has since performed numerous times at Pacifica Performances.

With her stepdaughter Pat at the founding helm, Mildred was also instrumental in putting the Pacifica Recycling Center on the map. To do her part for the environment, she continuously brought containers to restaurants so that no one in her party would go home with leftovers in Styrofoam. Along with fellow Pacificans Mike Mooney and Susan Vellone, Mildred picked up trash and weeds off the highway and planted flowers in their place. She was very involved with the nonprofit MoveOn.org, "the largest independent progressive advocacy group in the country." She was the 2008 President of the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce and served on the 2009 Board. She was a volunteer reader for Pacifica schools. She had numerous vocal students, attended every concert she could and joined rallies so her voice could be heard. Throughout her lifetime she invited artists to stay in her home. There was also always room for a friend or family member in need. Additionally, her family noted, there was the guy who was just happy to live under her house, "for maybe twenty years." In addition to all this, she was the great encourager.

Following Mildred's death in 2009, both the *Pacifica Tribune* and the online San Mateo County coastside forum *Riptide* ([www.pacificariptide.com](http://www.pacificariptide.com)) – founded in 2007 by freelance copy editor and *Pacifica Tribune* columnist John Maybury – were filled with extraordinary tributes to Mildred. Pacifican, piano teacher, cellist, Seaside Singers conductor, performer, and another roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-the-job-done doer, the late Judy Tugendreich (1939-2017), wrote one of those tributes in *Riptide*. The March 30, 2009 posting is shared here.

*Like many others, I have been in disbelief that anything could ever halt Mildred in her tracks. Such a force. I cannot get my mind around the fact that I won't have a lesson on Wednesday, she won't be out in the kitchen at the Concert Hall loading cups in the dishwasher after a program, she won't be chastising me for not coming to a program she thought I should have attended, that she won't be at the opera next time, that she won't be there for all of us with her positive, of-course-you-can attitude. Self-criticism was brushed aside with words of reassurance and encouragement. She has left a legacy of how to teach gently, which inspired confidence in her students.*

*There are a lot of people who helped Mildred accomplish her goals--and she was an arm twister extraordinaire--but she was also in there working as hard as everyone else. She may have been an opera singer, but there was nothing of the diva about her.*

*Mildred's death leaves an immense hole in the fabric of this community. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know her well are having a hard time thinking of a world without her presence...*





On Sunday, July 26, 2009, at a tribute concert to Mildred, champagne was poured and glasses were raised as Pacifica Performances renamed its Sanchez Concert Hall - The Mildred Owen Concert Hall.

In the April 2009 *Pacifica Tribune* story, Mildred's stepson Mike said: *"She was a stimulating voice for anybody who did anything artistic and she not only had an essential awareness of what they were trying to do with their art, but she wanted to be part of it because she was thrilled by it."*

In his recent interview, Mildred's brother Alvin recalled his big sister with joy and humor.

"Mildred was never shy about anything," Alvin said, "especially giving orders to her little brother when we were kids. As we grew older, we developed a very loving relationship toward each other – as long as we didn't discuss politics!"



**Mildred at home in Pacifica, 1992.**



**Mildred and her brother Alvin in Leonard, Texas, circa 1988, with Aunt Bess.**



**Mildred and Alvin in Oaxaca, Mexico, circa 1999.**





**Clay and Mildred, 10th Wedding Anniversary, 2000.**



