

A Musical Prodigy and Matriarch

By Clara Shen and Family

On July 27, 2012, Clara Shen turned 100 years old. She had four children, six grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. When the extended family gathered every year by a lake in Maine, they listened to stories that “Gma” or “GGma” told about her life: her childhood in Oregon, the “perfect” Cantonese she picked up from her father’s business associates in his dry-goods store, modeling for magazines and poster art, lessons from her brief career as a concert pianist, teaching piano in Hamden during the later years of her life, perusing shops in Maine for exceptional Chinese antiques, and many other remarkable tales. A favorite story was when Clara gave a piano recital at Yale University’s Sprague Hall and, while pedaling, her heel was caught in a dent previously made by a cello’s endpin.

Clara was born in Portland, Oregon, and began her concert piano career at the age of four, regularly performing live radio broadcasts—a “Chinese” sensation within the local community. So important was music to Clara that when she was nine years old, her family shipped her piano from Portland to Shanghai when her father moved his business there in 1922. Things didn’t work out as planned, and the family returned to Portland after several months—with the piano.

After Clara’s father died when she was thirteen, time for studying piano quickly faded away, though it was not long before a new chapter in her life began. At the age of seventeen, during a visit to Chicago, she was swept off her feet by the son of a wealthy merchant, and before she knew it she was married and living in Hong Kong. The next eleven years were steeped in Hong Kong high society, the rites of filial piety, her in-laws’ *Toisan* dialect, and motherhood.

By 1940, with both her marriage and Hong Kong’s political situation collapsing, Clara escaped to the United States with her two daughters to start again. It was only after she had remarried and settled down in Hamden that Clara resumed her studies as a pianist, culminating in her debut at New York’s illustrious Town Hall in 1947. Feeling pressure to prioritize raising her children, however, she directed her musical talents away from professional performance and into social life—teaching piano, playing chamber music, and serving as a trustee of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra—and into three generations of her family.

Today, Clara’s legacy lives on in her family and her friends as they remember her music and her stories and continue to be inspired by her fortitude. The several generations of Clara’s family in the U.S. live in the greater New Haven area.