

Historical Ramblings

History is Music to Our Ears

I recently had the pleasure of visiting with an old friend, Karen Foreman, director of the Lompoc School of Music. Karen came to Lompoc in 1966 and attended local schools. She became an accomplished pianist and began giving private piano lessons, eventually teaching at Allan Hancock College. Five years ago, she opened her school of music, which now boasts over 150 students studying a variety of instruments as well as vocal instruction.

While showing me around her impressive facility, she suddenly reached into a file and handed me a photocopy of an article that appeared in the Winter, 2000 edition of "The California Music Teacher." "I've been meaning to get this to you," she said excitedly. The article was about Florence Stephenson, a San Diego resident and well-known piano teacher, regarded in that city as the Grande Dame of the keyboard. As I read through the article, Lompoc suddenly played a predominant role in the story.

In the midst of the depression, Florence Stephenson graduated from the Toronto Conservatory of Music. Shortly thereafter she married her husband Joe and moved to Lompoc. At that time, she was the only piano teacher in town, bartering piano lessons for food, household supplies, baby-sitting and manicures. She taught the daughters of the local general store proprietors and had free rein throughout their establishments. She would pick up goods, catch the eye of one of the owners and just walk out. At the end of the month, he would send her a bill and she would send him one. Whoever owed the most, paid.

Florence's student piano recitals in Lompoc were huge events involving the entire town. It seems they were big productions as well, involving costumes, sets and speaking parts. "I was the designer, playwright and drama coach. I wrote a play to accompany the music, so my students learned a bit about acting. One of the plays involved dancing the minuet, so I checked out a book about the minuet and taught them how to dance," she stated in the article. Her recitals were held in the high school auditorium and the town supported them wholeheartedly. A local gardener even supplied flowers for corsages.

Although Florence focused on teaching in Lompoc, she continued honing her performing skills by conducting and accompanying a large traveling chorus and symphony comprised of musicians from Santa Maria, Santa Ynez and Lompoc. She also pioneered duo-piano music with local pianist Grace Anderson by playing many recitals and concerts in Lompoc, Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo.

The article went on to tout Florence's career as the first pianist with a fledgling San Diego Symphony, illustrating her lifelong passion for music. She continued to teach piano until her death in 2004 at age 99.

As I finished the article, Karen stated, "My music school's roots can be traced back over seventy years, to Florence Stephenson." I listened intently as she continued. "My piano teacher was Sue Lundberg Godden, a

native of Lompoc and much respected local music teacher. Sue's piano teacher was none other than Florence Stephenson!"

History sometimes sneaks up on you unexpectedly. It certainly did during my visit with Karen Foreman. Suddenly, the Lompoc School of Music was part of a local musical legacy, a legacy that brought joyful music to hundreds of students and their families during the great depression. The legacy continued with Sue Godden, who carried on the tradition for many years, giving piano instruction to another few hundred local youth.

The torch has passed to Karen. To Karen, history is indeed "music to her ears."