

Edith Irwin Blodgett

Born: September 29, 1916

Death: April 2, 2012

Edith Irwin was born in Grand Rapids, MI, and lived on Wealthy St. between Paris Ave. and Union Blvd. Her father was Dr. Thomas C. Irwin, who was chief of staff at Blodgett Hospital in 1928 and again in 1934. Before her marriage, her mother (no name given in interview) had hoped to be an opera singer, but her ambition was unfulfilled both in New York City and in Chicago. Edith had two older brothers: Thomas Irwin, Jr., born in 1906, and Robert, born in 1911.

For elementary school, the siblings went to Wealthy Street School (at the time of this interview, it had been renamed Vandenberg Elementary School) at the corner of Wealthy St. and Lafayette Ave. Then they went on to Grand Rapids Central High School. In the summers, they went to the family's cottage on Lake Michigan. The cottage was on 40 acres of land—20 acres on the lake and 20 acres of farmed land. About the cottage, Edith said: "It was healthy but rather lonely, for our friends were in cottages elsewhere. So we had to import our friends for a period of time."

Because of her mother's love of music, Edith and her brothers were each required to take piano lessons, starting at six years old. She said at first she did not enjoy them, but "as [she] grew older and went on to junior college, [she] did major in music because [she too] really loved it."

After graduating from Grand Rapids Junior College (now Grand Rapids Community College) with an associate's degree in Business, Edith went on to Katherine Gibbs, which was a "well reputed" secretarial school in Boston. "My brother Bob was in Harvard at the time, and he said he would look out for me, so that's what he did," said Edith, adding that she also went to that school "because it was during the depression and my brothers had gone to college, but at that time it wasn't considered essential for women to go to college." But [she] thought [she] should learn something that would help [her] to support [herself] if [she] had to.

After earning her secretarial certificate, Edith went to New York City to work. "I wanted to get a job, and I wanted to get a job in music," she said. Her first job was as a telephone receptionist at a radio advertising agency on Park Ave. But she confessed that "[she] had no idea how to run a telephone."

Six months later, "a girl across the hall" asked Edith to replace her as the secretary to a man who managed young stage actors. Edith obliged until she learned that the girl expected to have her job back after her marriage and honeymoon. So Edith left the music field and found a job at Barnard College as a faculty secretary.

Then Edith decided to move back to Michigan and found a job at the University of Michigan as the secretary to the Dean of Women. About this experience, she said, "I loved Ann Arbor, and I

did take some musical appreciation courses [at the university].” But she added, “One of my sad jobs was when [the girls in the dormitories] had been rushing for the sororities, I had to go around and give the envelopes to the various clubs and tell them who had been elected and who had not, and that was kind of a sad job. I didn’t particularly enjoy that.”

In 1939, Edith moved back to New York City and worked as a secretary to the vice president of Railway Express Agency. “It was the best job I had. . . . My boss was a lawyer and designated to be there in case any legal problems came up, but in the meantime, I had nothing to do. It was very boring,” she said. During that time, she met her first husband (no name given in interview). The couple was married on May 2, 1942. Her husband was stationed in “five places before he went overseas to India [with the Air Service Command] for 2 ½ years.” During that time, Edith worked as a secretary for a Mrs. Carolyn Hillman (no other information given in the interview).

Her husband was discharged from the service in Torrance, CA, and, according to Edith, they started their married life in Bedford, CA. In 1945, their son Duke was born, but died in 1949. In 1950, their daughter Wendy was born. By then the family was back in Manhasset, NY, on the Northern Boulevard of Long Island. Edith sang in the choir of Manhasset Congregational Church and started teaching piano lessons. She had 20 students. She also served as president of the Concert Association, which ran one-week membership drives and then decided what concerts to bring to the community based on the amount of money it raised.

At some point, Edith’s first husband died, but no details are given in the interview.

In 1967, Edith married John (Jack) Blodgett. The ceremony took place in the same church as her first wedding—Central Presbyterian Church on Park Ave. and 65th St. For their honeymoon, they sailed on the Queen Elizabeth I and spent 8 weeks in Europe. John Blodgett had been a childhood friend of Edith’s brother Bob and had also attended Harvard University. When Bob died, his obituary was published in the Harvard Magazine, and John read that Bob’s sister was widowed and living in New York City. Widowed himself, John wrote a letter to Edith, saying that he came to New York City and would like to take her out to dinner. After dating for a year, they were married. Edith described her second husband as “a romantic.” For instance, while the couple was in Europe, Edith learned how to ride side-saddle on a horse. “He had a little statue of ladies riding with side-saddles, and he thought that was just lovely, so I had to do that,” Edith explained.

When they returned to America, the couple came to Grand Rapids and moved into the Blodgett family home, called Brookby House. According to Edith, her mother-in-law had “tried very hard to have [the house] be a replica of the Georgia manor type home.” It was built on 8 acres of what had been a potato field. Its name comes from a little brook that runs through the property.

Edith had a long history of community service. She was on the board of Aquinas College first when Peter O’Connor was president and then again when Paul Nelson was head. She was on the board of the Grand Rapids Symphony from 1969 to 1982. In the early years, Edith acted as the secretary. By the time she was board president, she and her friend, Harriet Freeman, had played important roles in the hiring of conductor, Theo Alcantara, and the building of the symphony from a four-piece string quartet to a 27-member orchestra. “The reason they asked me to be

president was that I was a woman and had the time,” she said. She was also involved in the hiring of the next two conductors—the Russian Semyon Bychkov and the French Catherine Comet. About her years on the board, Edith said, “The growth was so exciting, and the personnel and guests were so wonderful. I think [Alcantara’s] final concert was with Isaac Stern. It was a very exciting period to be involved with the symphony.” At the time of this interview, Edith was an “honorary member” of the symphony board. Asked if she was still active, she said, “People come to me and ask my opinion and advice. They don’t always listen to it, but I give it to them. I’m still involved.” From 1984 to 1987, Edith volunteered her time and talent on the board of the Community Health Visiting Nurses Association.

Starting in 1969, Edith was on the Junior Board of Blodgett Memorial Hospital. Over the years, she had served as president twice, each time for 2 years. The hospital, according to Edith, was built in 1916 by John W. Blodgett, Sr., in memory of his mother, Jane Wood Blodgett. In 1952, an addition was built. Edith had also worked once a month in the “Window Shop.”

At the time of this interview, her surviving brother was living in Grand Rapids, and they would go out to dinner every night. She was also spending the summers at a cottage that she referred to as “a little shack built by a couple of professors from Earlham University in Indiana in the 1940s.” Her other interest was travel. “I think traveling is a broadening experience,” she explained. Finally, her hope for the future was to “learn more about music and get more knowledgeable, so she could be a critic of music.”

Other Resources: