

Celeste Varagona – Oak Ridge music teacher who has touched many lives

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | August 28, 2006

First, let me provide a clarification regarding the source of much of the information in the second part of the last Historically Speaking article. There among other things, I presented the details and comments about four of the Clinton 12. While I intended to do so, upon reading the article after it was published, I realized I had failed to clarify the source of those comments. The Green McAdoo Organization has a tremendously well-done web site and while I did mention the organization, I failed to properly identify the web site as the source of the material and to encourage you to go there for further information. The link is: www.greenmcadoo.org.

Second, let me thank you readers who have commented favorably on recent Historically Speaking articles. I sincerely appreciate your encouragement. I also must thank those of you who help me by pointing out mistakes or giving me additional information to clarify or amplify the stories. Surely this series is striking a positive note with many of you and your feedback is much needed and appreciated. I should state that my approach to these articles has been to follow my interests and hope the resulting articles are of interest to you, the reader, as well.

What started out to be just a few articles has lasted since January 2006. I don't know how much longer it will hold out. Writing a weekly column is not an easy task. Much of what I do is drawn from other sources such as old newspaper articles, books and magazines, however by far the most intriguing and valuable sources of material are those insights and stories I get from phone calls and e-mails from those of you who read the columns and have an idea you want to share.

Your input is valuable, needed and most assuredly wanted. I started out with stories about people and occasionally inserted some details that might be little known as items of interest. The future of these articles will depend on readily available information. As you know, my time is limited and research is time consuming. I appreciate the understanding The Oak Ridger has given me in allowing me to set the direction of the articles and determine the content of the stories. So, if you have ideas for Historically Speaking, please call at 482-4224 or send me an e-mail at draysmith@comcast.net. Thank you in advance.

Now for Celeste!

On April 22, 2006, my wife, Fanny, and I attended a "dinner piano recital" featuring a friend of ours, Larry Reynolds. The invitation stated that the recital would be held at "The Studio of Celeste Varagona."

This was our first such experience and we did not know exactly what to expect. However, we were very excited to have been invited. I found myself thinking and said to Fanny, "Only in Oak Ridge could something such as this happen."

What I meant was that our friend Larry Reynolds is someone with a highly technical and scientific background. He is someone with extremely analytical reasoning and someone who was quiet and rarely prone to speak very much publicly. Further, he is someone we have known for a number of years - yet I was only vaguely aware that he even had an interest in music much less played classical piano!

So, the night arrived and we drove to Celeste's studio – her home. Yet, it is so much more than her home. Her "studio" fills an entire wing of her house and has three large pianos. The walls are completely covered with diplomas, certificates and photographs (easily seen to be special photos loaded with meaning, loving relationships and caring friendships).

Appetizers were served first and we enjoyed small talk with friends and wondered how so many people were going to fit into that small space that was obviously the studio. The crowd was a mixed group of friends specifically chosen by Larry. His audience was a select group. Each person was precisely decided upon as anyone knowing him would expect.

After enjoying the appetizers, we gathered in the closeness of the studio for the recital. Larry played Bach (one movement on two pianos with Celeste on the second piano), Beethoven, Brahms, Gross, Chopin, Granados, Chaminade and Gershwin (again on two pianos with Dan Fetzter on the second piano).

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The music was spellbinding and the sound was both delicate and crisp in the studio. I would not have thought it so, but the low ceiling and the small nature of the studio along with the many people filling all available seats made the music very intimate. Somehow the listener seemed to be drawn into the music in a most unusual way. I thoroughly enjoyed the evening of music from my friend whom I have seen in a much different light ever since.

Celeste has been Larry's teacher for a number of years. I think he continues taking music lessons because of his love for perfection and the challenge of playing the classic music well. He says he knew how to play the piano before he met Celeste, but she is teaching him how to make music. Larry is so self-effacing that he would never admit to playing to perfection, but he surely comes so very close. Only he (and maybe Celeste) could hear even a hint of any mistakes in his playing.

Dinner was served after the recital, Italian, of course, and bounteous for sure. While filing through the line to the pot of spaghetti we passed by more memorabilia on the walls and it was obvious that we were in a special place. If you are reading this and you studied with Celeste, you know right away what I mean by the memorabilia she has on display. I imagine there are many more certificates, photographs, documents and such that are not displayed than there are out where they can be seen.

The meal was relaxed and the time spent in quiet and enjoyable conversation was pleasant and relaxing. Fanny and I chose to eat outside on the patio enjoying the early evening and spring freshness in the air. Most others at the recital chose the outside option as well.

A key player in the music history of Oak Ridge since her arrival in 1960, Celeste Varagona was born Celeste Spina and was reared in Florence, Italy. She came to the United States in 1952. Joseph Varagona, the son of a friend of her aunt, accompanied the family to meet Celeste when she got off the ship in New York. Joseph was an American born of Italian parents who had recently earned an engineering degree from Georgia Tech. He and Celeste soon fell in love. They married and she has been in the United States ever since.

Celeste has been immersed in music virtually all her life. She grew up in Florence, Italy, where her father, Guiseppe Spina, was a prominent musician. He was professor of music at the Guiseppe Verdi Conservatory in Florence, conductor of the Angelicum Theatre in Milan, and served often as substitute conductor at the world-famous La Scala Opera House. Before emigrating to the United States, Celeste earned the equivalent of bachelor's and master's degrees in teaching, music theory and harmony from the Guiseppe Verdi Conservatory.

When she arrived in the United States, she spoke no English, only Italian, German, French and Spanish. However, that changed. By the time she had been in Oak Ridge for two years, she began to teach music. First there were only a few students but that soon changed. From those early years she has never had to concern herself with students to teach, in fact, there is generally always a waiting list.

Celeste encourages her students to perform often in public, to perform in ensembles, and to participate in competitions. She believes these are keys to becoming proficient and confident musicians. Under her guidance, her school-age students have been participating in and winning piano competitions for over 30 years. Collectively, they have won 235 best-in-state silver trophies from the Federation of Music Clubs, 42 have received the high school diploma in piano performance from the Piano Guild, USA; and two have had their performances recognized as "Best in the USA". Celeste herself has been involved in judging piano competitions at the national and international level for many years. In 1988 she was named to the Piano Guild of USA Hall of Fame.

In October, Celeste will present her 26th annual Quartet Ensemble Concert where her students perform 2-piano compositions for 4- and 8-hands. Each year the concert has a different theme and the young performers enjoy dressing in period costumes.

As for the adult students like my friend Larry: Every two months for 31 years, Celeste has hosted a dinner party recital for her adult students. Students bring appetizers and desserts and Celeste provides Italian pasta, meatballs and salad. That's 187 Italian dinners similar to the one Fanny and I experienced. In between eating and visiting, each student plays a piece or two they have been working on. Often Celeste invites local musicians to

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play other instruments or one of her former students will drop in and participate. The December party features Christmas music complete with sing-alongs and costumes.

Through all this musical activity, Celeste and Joseph have managed to raise 6 children who seem to have merged Joe's engineering and scientific skills with Celeste's teaching and musicianship. Each plays at least 3-4 musical instruments. The youngest, Deanna, is a professional musician who sings and plays 13 musical instruments, has recorded a number of CDs and toured extensively in the United States and abroad as a solo performer and with Lamb Chops and Bobby Bare, Senior. Another daughter and her husband are active in the Nashville music industry. And there is a high school teacher, an engineer, an architect, and a molecular biologist.

Celeste and Joseph Varagona had been married for 54 years at the time of Larry's recital. Joseph has always been an active and beloved member of Celeste's extended musical family. I'm told he especially relishes the Christmas sing-alongs. However, he was very sick the evening we were there and remained in a back bedroom. Celeste has had struggles with her health of late as well.

I am sure those of you who have been privileged to know her over the years can attest to the kind and thoughtful way she has taught students, both children and adults, over the years. You know of the healthy challenge and strict requirements she imposed while obviously deeply caring for her students. You can cite examples of people you know who are musicians now and who attribute much of their success to her excellent teaching. Celeste has had tremendous impact on so many lives through her positive influence and excellent musical skills.

When the evening of Larry's recital ended, I was not ready for it to stop. Such an experience is very rewarding and makes one proud to know such great talent, if only through opportunities such as that afforded Fanny and me when Larry asked us to attend his recital. We would certainly love to do that again!

Celeste Varagona is truly an Oak Ridge historical treasure. She has touched many lives and stands as a symbol of yet another unique aspect of Oak Ridge, where the finest craftsmanship and professionalism can be found in all types of endeavors. Hers is but one example. The musical history of Oak Ridge is much richer because Celeste Varagona chose to spend her life among us!



Unique and loved Oak Ridge music teacher whose students have won numerous competitions and who is herself an award-winning pianist