One FW Woman’s Idea Created Worldwide Cliburn Competition

By MILT HOPWOOD

With Fort Worth’s Cliburn International Piano Competition holding center stage in the music world, Mrs. Catherine Lankford Haden eased into a comfortable chair in her office and recalled the origin and the early days of what has become America’s greatest piano extravaganza.

Daughter of the late Dr. Grace Ward Lankford, president and co-founder of the Fort Worth Piano Teachers Forum, Mrs. Haden not only had a front seat at the beginning of the event, but became immersed in every detail of the organization by working as her mother’s secretary and chief aide.

“It all began when mother organized a dinner in honor of Van Cliburn’s mother, Mrs. Rildia Bee Cliburn, for the Fort Worth Piano Teachers Forum. Van had won the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow and had returned to the United States to the first ticker-tape parade ever to a classical musician by the city of New York,” she said.

“Mrs. Cliburn, my mother felt, was due recognition for the many years of teaching and encouraging her son so well. The dinner was held November 30, 1958 and several hundred Fort Worth citizens attended to hear an announcement by Dr. Irl Allison, founder and president of the National Guild of Piano Teachers, that $10,000 was pledged to the first place winner of an international piano competition to be held in the United States. It was to be styled ‘The Van Cliburn International Quadrennial Competition.’ Most people would have assumed that such an event would have to be staged in New York, Boston or Philadelphia, but not mother. In a few days she was on the phone to Dr. Allison, asking, ‘Why not Fort Worth?’”

Dr. Allison replied that if it could be carried out on a scale and in the manner the importance of the event warranted, then he was all for staging the competition in Fort Worth. For the next two years, Dr. Lankford, according to Mrs. Haden, devoted almost all of her time to the competition.

“She dictated thousands of letters, made innumerable phone calls and visited anybody and everybody who could help get the project off the ground. I typed so many letters, licked so many stamps and was so deeply involved that I remember almost every detail. I recall that Joe Clarke, executive vice president of the Fort Worth National Bank, was our first treasurer and our strongest supporter.”

Dr. Lankford’s efforts were rewarded by financial support from businessmen, help from the Chamber of Commerce and facilities and staff assistance from Texas Christian University. First officers of the Van Cliburn Foundation Inc. were Lorin A Boswell, chairman; Sam Cantey III, vice chairman; Joe Clarke, treasurer; Grace Ward Lankford, corresponding secretary and general chairman of the competition; Mrs. Ewell J. Robinett, recording secretary; and Richard Lee Brown, attorney.

“One of my brightest memories,” said Mrs. Haden, “was the appearance of Artur Rubenstein here for a concert at which $10,000 was raised. It was the first actual cash in the bank for the Van Cliburn Competition. And Van Cliburn himself made four appearances. His name and fame helped considerably. But, on the other hand, there were several people that were hard to convince, so we just kept plugging away. We had wonderful help and encouragement from one of my favorite people, Brooks Morris (conductor emeritus of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra) and, gradually, many fine people in the community. Congressman Jim Wright especially was helpful. He opened a lot of doors to spread the word to foreign embassies and countries. The result was 47 pianists from 11 nations. We literally were off and running.”

Grace Ward Lankford served as executive director of the Cliburn in 1962 and then again in 1966. She died October 31, 1967 and her daughter, Mrs. Haden, was executive director for the events of 1969 and 1973.

Mrs. Haden has seen the Cliburn Competition from the time of its conception and infancy to its present status as America’s premier piano competition. She went through the early frenzied activity and travail of getting things started and she smiled as she said, “I have a lot of delightful memories, despite all those long hours.

“I have so many wonderful memories of people who pitched in and helped make the Cliburn. There have been thousands, you know. We built something of which Fort Worth and Texas can be proud. I know my mother would be pleased and delighted that she and Dr. Allison established an event which has turned out so beautifully.”