Korth, Hume Helped Grace Lankford Launch Cliburn Competition Here

Paul Hume was music editor of the Washington Post from 1947 to 1982. He will be remembered as the critic who was threatened by President Harry Truman for writing an unflattering review of a concert by Truman's daughter, Margaret. Hume, who will serve as commentator for American Public Radio's coverage of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition May 30-June 2, recalls events leading up to the start of the competition in 1962.

By PAUL HUME

A breakfast meeting at 8 a.m. to talk about starting an international piano competition in Fort Worth! That was my introduction to the Van Cliburn Competition. It took place in Washington in 1960, two years before the first competition was held in 1962. But that was one sign of the thorough planning and preparation, that Grace Ward Lankford put into the administration of the now internationally famous quadrennial competition. She was an indomitable woman who called me to say that I would be at that 8 o'clock breakfast because that was the only time she could get Fred Korth and Sal Hurok and me together.

Korth, a longtime Fort Worth leader, who is still practicing law in Washington, was then assistant secretary of the Army. He was one of Grace's strong supporters in getting the competition properly financed and administered.

Hurok was, as he had been for many years and remained until his death in 1974, the number one impresario in the country whose advice would be right out of the top drawer. Grace wanted me there both because of my role as music editor of The Washington Post and because I was already committed to attending the first competition as an observer.

That first competition brought up some memorable experiences. Soon after I arrived in Fort Worth, Grace called to ask me if I would be willing to sit, at the formal luncheon at the Fort Worth Club the day before the preliminary rounds were to begin, between the Japanese judge and judge from the Soviet Union. Other than Japanese, the visitor from the Orient spoke only French, while the Russian judge spoke only his language and German. Grace said that she did not know anyone in Fort Worth who could discuss music and related matters in both French and German.

While I am comfortable in both languages, I distinctively remember the unusual sensation of turning from a conversation auf deutsch with Lev Oborin, the Soviet judge, to one en francais with the gentleman from Japan.

That luncheon was on a Sunday. One week later-by which time the competitors had become acquainted with each other and had built up the ever-present rivalry—a different kind of experience demonstrated Fort Worth's generosity of spirit and hospitality.

Someone told Grace Lankford that some of the competitors from foreign countries had never seen anything like an American supermarket drug store. For Grace that was no challenge at all. On the Sunday morning midway through the competition weeks, she asked a friend of hers who owned one of the biggest and shiniest of all these stores in the city to open it up just for the competitors. He willingly complied, and for a couple of hours some amazed young pianists wandered wide-eyed around the store, buying all sorts of things from cosmetics to articles of clothing. One of the two competitors from the Soviet Union insisted that the store "surely belongs to the government" and was amazed to be assured that it was very much a private enterprise.

That same founding year, Grace Lankford received huge quantities of mail on every subject related to the competition. While most of it was supportive and friendly, there was a small amount, probably inevitable, of hate mail, including one unsigned letter that said, "If a Russian wins this contest, you are dead!" Happily there was no, during the competition, or at any other time, any overt incident, but rather what seemed long outpouring of Texan hospitality in the homes where the competitors were guests and throughout the sessions in Ed Landreth Auditorium of Texas Christian University.