

Arts in the Making

Ojai woman had front-row seat to California's cultural growth

Ojai's Marian Burke had a ring-side seat to the creation of a large part of Southern California's cultural institutions.

Burke sat at the right hand of Dorothy Chandler, one of the founders of Los Angeles' flourishing music culture, as her administrative assistant for 30 years. Chandler was the vice president of the Times Mirror newspaper, as well as the founder of the L.A. Music Center, and sat on many prominent nonprofit boards. Burke, who came to Ojai when she retired from the Times in 1985, considers it a stroke of luck to have been a small part of it all.

Burke, born to a comfortable family who moved to California in 1929, still marvels at the path that took her into the inner workings of a growing city.

"I attended UCLA for three years until I discovered it didn't have a lot more to offer me," said Burke. "I had thought I wanted to be a teacher, but when I decided that wasn't for me, I thought, 'Why am I still here?'"

Instead of staying to get her degree, she convinced her father to pay for her to attend a prestigious secretarial school. After honing her skills there, she went to work for the Times Mirror, where she was working when she was drafted to work for Mrs. Chandler.

"I was working for the managing editor, Ed Murray, at the time and really liked my job," said Burke. "He was a lot of fun, a really interesting person, and I got to meet all kinds of new people."

Burke also remembers not being too anxious to leave her position when her supervisors asked her to interview with Chandler.



Marion Burke with Dorothy "Buffy" Chandler.

"She really didn't know how to interview people, or what questions to ask. All she wanted was a person to follow her directions. I was trying to make up conversation that wasn't going anywhere and finally I said, 'I guess I'd better get back to my desk.' Then she looked at me and said, 'Well, I think you'll do.' So I went back to work and nothing more was said."

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Burke now remembers that first interview with Chandler fondly and with humor.

"She really didn't know how to interview people," said Burke, "or what questions to ask. All she wanted was a person to follow her directions. I was trying to make up conversation that wasn't going anywhere and finally I said, 'I guess I'd better get back to my desk.' Then she looked at me and said, 'Well, I think you'll do.' So I went back to work and nothing more was said."

According to Burke, a couple of weeks later she got a call from Mr. Chandler's secretary.

"All he said was, 'The Chandlers are in Europe and I think you'd better come and look at the files.' That was it," said Burke. "So I told my boss I guess they want me up there. I worked for her for 30 years. The whole first year I thought she'd get rid of me, but she never did."

According to Burke, Chandler's effect on the L.A. music scene was felt as early as 1952 when Chandler consolidated the boards of the California Symphony Association and the Hollywood Bowl Association. Later in the decade, after three bond measures to build a new music center failed, Chandler took the reins, raised the funds herself and went on to build the Los Angeles Music Center.

Burke feels that the Music Center gave people a reason to come to Los Angeles.

"She had a knack," said Burke. "She took over the society page and turned it into the woman's section, covering women's issues of the time and encouraging women to work for the betterment of their community. When Mrs. Chandler built that first building (at the Music Center complex) she didn't tell people she had two other buildings in mind."

According to Burke, Chandler didn't miss a beat. She began small with a letter-writing campaign in 1955, ending up with more than 2,000 names on her list.

"I remember when she went to Mark Taper and asked him for a million," said Burke, "and then to Howard Ahmanson and asked him for a million. They both gave it to her, they couldn't say no. She raised over \$19.5 million in five years. She



Marian Burke at home in Ojai.

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just knew she could do it."

According to Burke, another indicator of Chandler's style was her "Big Buck Drive" initiated at the Music Center dedication in 1964. Chandler called for every Angelino to donate a dollar, and this proved a tremendous success bringing in over \$1 million in funding.

According to Burke, Chandler was a formidable woman who personally knocked on J. Paul Getty's Paris hotel door uninvited and returned with a \$50,000 donation.

"Mrs. Chandler couldn't take no for an answer," said Burke, which sometimes proved to be one of the few downsides to Burke's employment. "When she got mad it was devastating and I was right there, but she got over it."

"She was quite a woman," said Burke. "For an older woman to do what she did then, she was a dynamo. Everybody knew her in town. Originally when they brought her onto the Times they gave her two jobs, head of the society page and building the Times headquarters building, at 2nd and Broadway. She tossed those off while she was building the Music Center."

Burke said her life during those 30 years was exciting, but it was all work.

"I took my time off when she was gone," said Burke, who continued to work for Chandler after she left the paper. "She couldn't seem to operate without me being there somehow. She depended on me for everything."

Burke says she wouldn't have it any differently.

"It was fascinating," continues Burke. "I've never met anyone who had a life like mine."

She remembers one of the few times she accompanied the Chandlers on a trip.

"That was one of the really exciting things," said Burke. "Stanton Avery, who owns Avery International, you know the company that made those little stickers*, invited Mrs. Chandler and I to go to his castle in Scotland."

Burke was flown in Avery's private jet to his castle built on the edge of a cliff.

"It was beautiful. The only thing I couldn't figure out was how they figured out where everybody was. All those rooms," said Burke. "They had this big brass drum by the front door that they used to announce dinner. I went out for these long walks and I always wondered if I should pound on it as I came in."

Burke retired in 1985 exactly 30 years to the day she went to work for Chandler.

"It was like nothing else," said Burke.

The 87-year-old Burke came to Ojai to retire after searching for a quiet locale with a fireplace, private patio, powder room, and room for a dog. While enjoying the quiet, she is still using those organizational skills Chandler found so indispensable. She is working with another formidable woman, Joan Kemper, founder of the Ojai Performing Arts Theater Foundation. Burke is busy archiving the documents for the organization which hopes to build a performing arts center in Ojai.

Dorothy Chandler wasn't only a dynamo, she had the keen intelligence to recognize another dynamo when she saw one, Marion Burke.

*Stanton Avery invented the first removable price stickers under the brand Kum-Kleen products, during the Depression.