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Huguette Clark, Reclusive Heiress, Dies at 104

By MARGALIT FOX

She was almost certainly the last link to New York's Gilded Age, reared in Beaux-Arts splendor in a 121-room Fifth Avenue mansion awash in Rembrandt, Donatello, Rubens and Degas. Her father, a copper baron who once bought himself a United States Senate seat as casually as another man might buy a pair of shoes, had been born before the Mexican War. Her six siblings died long before her, one in the 19th century.

Though she herself lived into the 21st century, Huguette Clark managed through determination and great wealth to spin out her golden childhood to the end of her long, strange, solitary life. Mrs. Clark died on Tuesday, at 104, at Beth Israel Medical Center, the Manhattan hospital where she had chosen to live in recent years, said Michael McKeon, a spokesman for Mrs. Clark's lawyer, Wallace Bock.

In retrospect, Mrs. Clark's life opens a portal onto the city's glory days of Astors, Guggenheims and Vanderbilts, for the Clarks once walked among them. More recently, however, thanks in large part to her singular efforts to avert the limelight, the family name has faded from view.

By all accounts of sound body and mind till nearly the end of her life, Mrs. Clark had lived, apparently by choice, cloistered in New York hospitals since the late 1980s. There, first in Doctors Hospital and later at Beth Israel, she was reported to have lived under a series of pseudonyms. (The most recent, MSNBC.com, said Tuesday, in reporting the news of her death, was Harriet Chase.)

In the hospitals, Mrs. Clark, whose given name is pronounced hyoo-GETT, was attended by round-the-clock private aides and surrounded by the fine French dolls she had collected since she was a girl.

Had things gone according to plan, she would almost certainly have died as she lived, hidden from sight, which seemed to be her ardent wish. But the very act of disappearing — and the questions it raised about her fate and her half-billion-dollar fortune — recently propelled her into the public eye after an absence of more than seven decades.

Mrs. Clark re-emerged last year, when MSNBC.com published the first in a series of investigative reports about her charmed life and odd, self-imposed sequestration.

The reports disclosed that although her three palatial homes — a 42-room apartment on Fifth Avenue; an oceanfront estate in Santa Barbara, Calif.; and a country manor in New Canaan, Conn. — are fastidiously maintained, she had not been seen in any of them for decades.

In addition, the reports raised questions about the handling of Mrs. Clark's financial affairs by her lawyer, Mr. Bock, and her accountant, Irving H. Kamsler. The reports quoted distant relatives of Mrs. Clark as saying they had sought to visit her in the hospital but were turned away by Mr. Bock or Mr. Kamsler. Mrs. Clark, who was briefly married long ago, had no children.

Through his spokesman, Mr. McKeon, Mr. Bock declined to comment on Tuesday. A statement released by Mr. McKeon referring to "Madame Clark's passing" said: "She died as she wanted, with dignity and privacy. We intend to continue to respect her wishes for privacy."

Mr. Kamsler's lawyer, Elizabeth Crotty, said her client had no comment.

With its keen dramatic elements — an outlandish family, lavish generosity and a 70-year effort to keep the world at bay — Mrs. Clark's story captivated the news media and the public.

As MSNBC.com and other news organizations have reported, during her years in hospitals, Mrs. Clark made large gifts to charitable causes, friends and associates. To her longtime nurse, for instance, she gave the money for several homes, which together are worth almost \$2 million.

Mrs. Clark gave a dollhouse worth more than \$10,000 to Mr. Bock's granddaughter; after the Sept. 11 attacks, she donated \$1.5 million for a security system to the settlement in Israel in which Mr. Bock's daughter and her family live.

Last August, the Manhattan district attorney's office began an investigation into the handling of Mrs. Clark's finances, which were managed by Mr. Bock and Mr. Kamsler for more than a decade. The investigation is continuing; no charges have been filed.

Mrs. Clark's case prompted comparisons to that of Brooke Astor, the New York socialite whose son and lawyer were convicted in 2009 of having defrauded her of millions of dollars before her death, at 105, in 2007.

But where Mrs. Astor remained a fixture of the city's social and philanthropic scene well into old age, Mrs. Clark was from her 30s onward an antisocial socialite, an enigmatic figure whose closest companions were her mother and her dolls.

The youngest of seven children, Huguette Marcelle Clark was a daughter of a scoundrel. Her father, William Andrews Clark, was born in 1839 to a threadbare Pennsylvania family. Footloose and ambitious, he made his way to the Montana Territory, where, in the early 1870s, he struck copper, and with it his fortune.

In the late 1890s, desiring a Senate seat, Mr. Clark went out and bought one, at least temporarily. By this time Montana was a state; under the United States Constitution, senators of the period were elected by their state legislatures. Mr. Clark, a Democrat,

was reported to have loosed a cataract of thousand-dollar bills on the Montana statehouse, to no small effect. He took up his Senate seat in December 1899.

He vacated the seat in May 1900 as the Senate weighed a resolution to void his election. Later returned to office by the legislature, he served one term, from 1901 to 1907.

By this time, Senator Clark was one of the richest men in America. In 1907, The New York Times estimated his fortune at \$150 million — roughly \$3 billion today. Besides copper, his interests included railroads, real estate, lumber, banking, cattle, sugar beets and gold.

His first wife bore five children, four of whom lived to adulthood. After her death in 1893, he took up with his teenage ward, Anna La Chapelle. They apparently married in 1901 and had two daughters, Andrée, born in 1902, and Huguette, born in Paris on June 9, 1906. At Huguette's birth, her mother was 28, her father 67.

After leaving the Senate, Mr. Clark settled his family in New York, erecting a mansion at 962 Fifth Avenue, at 77th Street, that was considered improvident even in an excessive age. Its 121 rooms included 31 bathrooms, 4 art galleries and a theater; there was also a swimming pool and a thundering pipe organ. It was there, interspersed with stays in California and France, that Huguette grew up.

In 1919, Andrée Clark, Huguette's sister, died of meningitis at 16; by all accounts her death shook Huguette deeply. Senator Clark died in 1925; many of the masterworks he owned now make up the William A. Clark Collection at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Huguette graduated from Miss Spence's School (now the Spence School) in Manhattan and was introduced to society in 1926. Not long after her father's death, she and her mother moved to an elegant apartment building at 907 Fifth Avenue, at 72nd Street.

In 1928, at 22, she married William MacDonald Gower, the son of a business associate of her father's. The union lasted nine months: she charged desertion; he maintained the marriage was unconsummated, according to a 1941 biography of the family, "The Clarks, an American Phenomenon," by William D. Mangam.

The couple were formally divorced in 1930; she chose to be known afterward as Mrs. Huguette Clark.

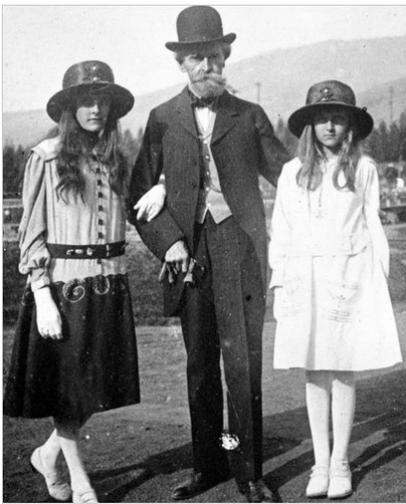
By the late 1930s, Mrs. Clark had disappeared from the society pages. Most if not all of her siblings had died; she lived with her mother at 907 Fifth Avenue, painting and playing the harp. Her mother died there in 1963.

For the quarter-century that followed, Mrs. Clark lived in the apartment in near solitude, amid a profusion of dollhouses and their occupants. She ate austere lunches of crackers and sardines and watched television, most avidly “The Flintstones.” A housekeeper kept the dolls’ dresses impeccably ironed.

And so ran the rhythm of Mrs. Clark’s life until the day she left for the hospital and checked herself in. Fittingly for someone who worked so hard to remain an enigma, her reasons were best known only to her. They seem to have been born, relatives have suggested in news accounts, of her dual desire for exquisite solitude and exquisite care.

In the end, perhaps Mrs. Clark’s fondest wish — simply to vanish — has been realized, at least to an extent. Some of the most conspicuous artifacts of her former life are gone, chief among them the family’s Fifth Avenue mansion, which was razed after her father’s death.

Her Connecticut estate is on the market for \$24 million. On the Web site advertising it for sale, photographs show its vast gracious rooms hauntingly empty.



Huguette Clark, right, with her father, William Andrews Clark, and older sister, Andrée, circa 1915, when Huguette was about 9



121- room mansion that her father built on Fifth Avenue