

# Late Art Patroness's Gift Keeps On Giving



A portrait of Edith Gavin, painted by Elmhurst artist Eleanor Hookham, hangs in the Elmhurst Public Library's Gavin Gallery. Furnishings for the gallery were funded by Edith and her husband, Steve, in memory of their daughter, Genevieve, who died suddenly at age 25. When Gavin died in May of 1970, she left the library a bequest of \$154,000. Library officials are currently discussing uses for the fund.

by Anne Dillon

Although she's been dead for more than 15 years, her name is still in the news.

Edith Gavin, the gentle-faced woman who is best remembered as the "picture lady" and patroness of the Elmhurst Public Library, is once again making her way onto the agendas of library board meetings.

Since it was discovered that Gavin, the only daughter of the wealthy industrialist Stephen VanDorn, had left the library a bequest of \$154,000, various library board committees have been formed to study possibilities for use of the fund, which now totals about \$435,000 with the accumulated interest.

However, when larger library projects came along, these committees were sidetracked.

What is stalling library officials from spending the money is some ambiguity in the interpretation of Gavin's

wording in her will.

When Gavin penned the document of May 26, 1970, just five months before her death, she wrote that the library should use the money to "carry on the work of visual education."

So, when the Golden Age of Video dawned about two years ago, library officials decided that buying videotaped movies would be one suitable way of complying with the will.

Two years ago, about \$30,000 from the fund, primarily from interest, was used to purchase video equipment and videocassettes. Last year, \$2,000 more was spent on videotaped material. And this year, the fund was tapped of another \$20,000 to update the collection.

"You'll be happy to know we haven't bought 'Rambo,'" says administrative librarian Marilyn Boria, adding that opera, short-story and how-to vid-

ecassettes make up a substantial part of the collection.

Library-goers, however, aren't likely to think of Edith Gavin when they're gathered around the family room TV watching "Benji" on their VCR. That's why the library is anxious to move ahead with purchasing something substantial which will pay more of a lasting tribute to Gavin. Library officials recently elicited the help of an attorney to help them decide on appropriate uses for the fund.

But deciding what type of purchase would have made Edith Gavin happy is no easy task. Those who remember her characterize Gavin as an interesting woman who — as photos of her wearing unflattering wigs will attest — was more interested in doing good for others than she was in appearances.

She was a plain little

lady with a great spirit," says Ruth Strand, who was head librarian in 1948 when Gavin began her volunteer work on the library's picture file. "She was quiet, but broad-minded and she was always interested in people and in new ideas."

Strand remembers Gavin best from the hours Gavin spent in the library adding to the picture file in the young people's room.

The massive picture collection, which now includes more than 17,000 matted and labeled images, was started by Gavin as a form of "attention-diverting busywork." Gavin found that when she was alone with her scissors, her magazines, her glue and her mat boards, she didn't think about Genevieve.

Genevieve, her beloved daughter who loved art and music as much as she did, died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage at age 25.

(Continued on Page 11)

# Late Art Patroness's Gift Keeps On Giving...

(Continued from Page 9)

"She took Genevieve's death very hard," says Kathleen Gavin, Edith Gavin's niece by marriage. "The library was a lifesaver for her. It did so much for her morale. I think that's why she left them the money."

Those who remember Edith Gavin know that Genevieve's death was just one of the emotional challenges that she overcame during her lifetime.

In a short biography on Gavin authored by Margaret Cooper Hahne, a woman who lived in the Gavin home while she was attending school in Elm-

hurst, Gavin is portrayed as a woman who brought art and life to everything around her, and never seemed to let on that she was wounded inside.

When after World War I, Gavin and her husband, Steven moved to Elmhurst which Hahne then described as a "dreary, unimaginative town," Edith didn't waste any time. She organized fine arts and dance classes for area young people.

In another characteristic move, Gavin, disillusioned with the voting process, helped organize a movement in Chicago which required voters to register before they cast their bal-

lots. She was also one of the area's charter members of the League of Women Voters.

Her interests were many and varied, says Kathleen Gavin. "She was always interested in books. She loved to read. She was interested in art very much — and peace — and politics." These interests were combined in Gavin's annual Christmas newsletter, which would include mini-reviews of books she's read, editorials on the political situation of the day, and sermons on such things as the decadence of materialism. But Gavin didn't wait until Christmas to

reveal her political sentiments.

"If she didn't like something that one of the politicians said, the next thing you know, she'd be sending a telegram there telling how she felt about it," says Lucille Campeggio, who worked with Gavin at the library. Then, echoing Kathleen Gavin's remarks, Campeggio added, "It seemed that she was interested in everything — except cooking — she hated cooking."

Gavin's niece added housecleaning to Gavin's hate list. "You could hardly get up the stairs," (of her house) she said, referring to

the stacks of clippings, magazines and books that cluttered Edith's abode. "The bathtub upstairs was filled with papers and books."

Edith's longtime friend, Elaine Barnes of Elmhurst, recalls, "After she died, they found rooms filled with clippings. She was always researching things."

Barnes is currently living in a house that once belonged to the Gavins. The house is six levels and is constructed entirely of concrete. Its kitchen is Pullman-style — very utilitarian and small. Kathleen Gavin explained that Edith wanted a cement house to

reduce the risk of fire.

When Gavin's health began to falter, after her husband Steve had suffered a stroke, the Gavins moved to a smaller home at 380 Argyle Ave., property which was later bequeathed to the library in accordance with Gavin's will.

In all, Gavin left the library the \$154,000 bequest, which includes the revenue generated from liquidation of her property on Argyle; furniture, artworks and books from her home; and funds for the furnishing of what is now known as the Gavin Gallery in a memorial to Genevieve.