



## Profile: Adelma Graham

Adelma Graham has been a beloved figure in the HGO Guild for over 30 years. Most people know Adelma from her work as an education docent but she is also a Studio Buddy, currently to Octavio Moreno and his lovely wife Ariadna. Adelma first joined the Houston Grand Opera Guild in 1975, although she wasn't particularly active until she retired in 1992 and saw an ad for education docents. I had the distinct pleasure of sitting down with Adelma for a little while and talking to her about her life.

Adelma has always loved music. She played piano from the age of six and also played the flute and piccolo. She was born in a small sulphur mining town south of Rosenberg, Texas and moved to Corpus Christi at the age of 8. After school, Adelma went to attend the University of Texas where she began as Architecture major, eventually switching to Sociology and Psychology while also taking courses in Education, thus allowing her to pursue a Teaching Certificate. It was at the University of Texas where Adelma first met a nice young gentleman named Walter – more on him later. Following her graduation Adelma taught the fourth grade in Corpus Christi while returning to the University of Texas in the summers eventually earning her Master's degree in Education. During this time Adelma was awarded a scholarship to attend Mexico City College. The courses in this summer course provided a lot of background for knowing more about Mexico's history, folk art, language and culture. She has since returned to Mexico many times.

It was in Corpus Christi that Adelma got her first exposure to opera. She and her mother had subscriptions to the Civic Music Association, which sometimes had opera singers perform. Also, Adelma and friends would visit San Antonio which had a short opera season in January and February with world famous singers performing. Adelma's first opera was *Elektra* and she also remembers seeing *La bohème* there. During her international travels Adelma had the chance to see operas in Paris, Wiesbaden, Milan, Florence, Leningrad, and even saw *Madame Butterfly* in Japan.

On one of her trips to the University of Texas Adelma saw that both the Army and the Air Force were looking for teachers to teach overseas. This was something that Adelma was interested in and immediately signed up. The U.S. Air Force offered Adelma a position and after the required processing set sail

from New York, sailing through a hurricane in the mid-Atlantic en route to Southampton. She was assigned to teach the third grade on a U.S. Air Force base near Oxford. Weekends provided time to travel with friends to London, to areas and towns in the south of England, to Wales, and before the school year started to Scotland. A highlight was a day trip to Stratford to see Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* with Sir Lawrence Olivier and Vivian Leigh. She also traveled to the continent to ski, to visit Paris, the Riviera, Italy, and to spend half the summer in Spain to attend the University of Madrid, and to tour many well known cities including El Escorial, Aranjuez, Seville, Cordoba, and other places in what was to become a lifelong love affair with the Iberian Peninsula. On a trip to El Escorial it was exciting to see Sofia Loren and Carlo Ponti eating at the next table at the Felipe II Hotel.

After England, Adelma went to teach in Wiesbaden, Germany, after which she received her dream assignment and was assigned to teach in Madrid in 1957. She lived in a high fashion designer's fully furnished apartment at Don Quixote Numero 1, from which Adelma remembers being able to hear the *cante jondo* singers from the street.

An especially memorable trip that Adelma and a friend took between school years in Madrid took her to Istanbul via Andorra in the Pyrenees, the south coast of France, the French Riviera, through a long tunnel in the Alps to Turin, Italy. The next day after driving to Milan her friend's car that had driven over many tortuous mountain passes would not go into gear after a stop at a red light. A repair shop and a taxi were called and the two young women got to the Yugoslavian Consulate just in time to procure visas before it closed for the weekend. The next day they had a nice tour to Lake Como and had a memorable meal at the Villa d'Este. Monday morning, with the repaired car, they drove to Venice, parked the car in the garage, took a ferry to the train station and bought tickets to Istanbul on the Simplon Orient Express. The train was a far cry from the images it inspires. There were stops in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Skopje, as well as an unexpected stop in Thessaloniki, Greece where the train did not leave until the next day, thus taking 30 hours to arrive in Istanbul. The last lap of that trip was sailing from Greece on the S. S. Jerusalem through the beautiful Asiatic right down the Grand Canal into Venice. Then they returned back to the garage to pick up the car and drove to Paris after which they

took a 24 hour train ride back to Madrid where they picked up their luggage and flew back to the US.

Adelma spent two years in Madrid after which she was transferred to Japan where she was to teach at a base in the metropolitan Tokyo area. Always having wanted to see India since she was a six year old stamp collector, Adelma and her roommate decided to take a leisurely seven week journey through the Middle East and Far East to Japan. Since she worked for the U.S. Air Force, she was able to fly as a passenger on embassy courier flights and military transports. Adelma and her roommate traveled through Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Karachi (Pakistan), and then spent two weeks in India allowing time to travel from New Delhi to visit the Taj Mahal in Agra, Jaipur (with a ride on an elephant to the Palace of Amber), Kashmir, and Benaras (Varnasi today), then on to Bangkok and the Philippines. Adelma left Manila on the S.S. President Hoover for Hong Kong, after which she charmed her way onto a military flight from Taiwan to Okinawa and then on to Japan. Adelma spent a year in Japan with so much to see, and everything new and different to American eyes. A highlight was a course in Japanese history from 1865 to the current date, taught by a former brigadier general in the Imperial Japanese Army during the Occupation of Manchuria, also a Baptist minister who could also play the organ in church, educated at Colgate University and Heidelberg University, ran a family service bureau, and was a university professor and an advisor to the Fifth Air Force. He was a wonderful teacher and took the class on Saturday fieldtrips, giving many examples of real Japanese life.

After Japan Adelma went back to Corpus Christi and taught fourth grade before being sent to spend two wonderful years in Ankara, Turkey and actually managed to pick up usable conversational Turkish! She remembers that there wasn't a regular school building, but that the school was in an apartment building with each classroom having one apartment. It was important to be adaptable, not just for troops, but for families, teachers and other personnel. She loved living in Turkey, learned some of the language, enjoyed the food, and joined the Turkish-American Association where she became a member of the travel committee.

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She was tour manager for two trips for visiting Americans and other members of the association. Indulging her persistent travel bug, Adelma visited Israel a couple of times, going to Cyprus during one of those trips. During another of these visits to the Holy Land, she and her friend decided to go across the Jordanian desert to visit Baghdad. At this point they didn't have a car, so they decided to take a jitney to Baghdad and ended up sharing a ride on the jitney with a couple of priests. Adelma remembers stopping in the middle of the desert at a roadside café and having delicious peppermint tea and trying hare for the first time. After some of the typical bureaucratic wrangling at the Jordan-Iraq border, they managed to arrive safely in Baghdad as the sun was coming up. They stopped and had tea and the host of the establishment insisted that they stay at his relative's new hotel in Baghdad and were subsequently invited to his house for New Year's Eve. Adelma had a wonderful time on New Year's Eve dancing with her handsome Arab hosts and was pleasantly surprised when she wasn't charged for her hotel stay. Since they were some of the first guests at the new hotel, none of the honored new guests were charged – just an example of traditional Arab hospitality.

From Baghdad, Adelma flew to Tehran, Iran and after checking in with the local Air Force air attaché, they enjoyed a lovely day sitting on the front porch of the Tehran Hilton drinking tea and enjoying the view. From Tehran, Adelma visited Persepolis, the capital of ancient Persia, where she visited the ruins and the royal tombs, as well as going to Shiraz, the cultural center of Persia, and Isfahan, the traditional home of the Persian rug industry. Back in Tehran, Adelma and her friend talked their way onto another military flight to Adana in Southern Turkey. It was on this flight where Adelma got an aerial view of the Armenian Highlands, home of Mount Ararat, and the spectacular spires of the Toros Mountains in southern Turkey.

After two years in Turkey Adelma wanted to go to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia but due to the housing situation the army deemed it not a good place for a single female, thus she was posted to an Army base in Mannheim, Germany teaching the fifth grade. During this posting Adelma had the chance to visit Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and, of course, her beloved Madrid over Christmas in her pearl white sun-roofed Volkswagen Beetle. After a short summer at home Adelma went to Mannheim, but before school started she was at headquarters in Heidelberg to ask what she could do get

to Ethiopia the next school year.

In the spring of 1964 the army told her if she could get a roommate to go with her she could go to Addis Ababa. Several women offered to go, but later changed their minds, but at last she was told she could go and would be teaching a combination of the fourth and fifth grades. She taught summer school, collected a lot of things she needed for a year in a remote area, and finally drove through the Swiss mountains to a point in Italy where her car was left for shipment to Djibouti. She took the train to Rome, boarded a plane to Ankara where she met up with old friends, dined on a local favorite, beef stroganoff, before flying to Athens to catch an Ethiopian fan tailed plane to Addis Ababa. It was a wonderful adventure at a mile above sea level, with only a hint of wood smoke to mar the otherwise pure air. A new apartment across the street from The Haile Selassie I University became home for the year, and furniture, a stove, a refrigerator, and other household furnishings arrived sometime in October.

While in Ethiopia Adelma took trips down to the Rift Valley by the lakes, which were at a lower altitude, to Kaffa province where coffee is grown, and took a long Easter trip to Asmara via the Nile River Gorge. Later she drove off the main road to view Lake Tana where the Blue Nile begins, then to Gondar, the old imperial capital of the country, where early Ethiopian history took place, and later through a canyon larger than the Grand Canyon, but not as deep. She drove through the winding road for over 5 hours before arriving at Axum, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Axum, and one of the holiest cities in Ethiopia, a place visited by the legendary Prester John. The next day she reached her destination, Asmara. She stayed with the assistant principal in Asmara, a lady, and a young Ethiopian, who worked at the American Embassy in Addis Ababa, and who accompanied her so he could change flat tires and help with driving, but forgot his glasses and therefore did not drive. On another day Adelma, her host Gladys, and others drove her Volkswagen Beetle down the 30 mile winding mountain road from over 5,000 feet to sea level. They stayed at a sheikh's large beach home where other teachers were staying. She still has some marvelous, large seashells that she bought from a local beachcomber. One day she and Gladys were invited to lunch at the home of the young Ethiopian's mother. They were served the famous Ethiopian dish of injera and Wat, (a spicy meat stew eaten with something like a large spongy tortilla, but made from a local grain.) It was delicious and they ate all they were served. A different

road was taken back to Addis Ababa and many colorful birds, which are common near the equator, were spotted. There was a dry mountainous terrain followed by beautiful earth with commercial cotton farms, and back to a dry landscape near Addis Ababa. In December she flew to Nairobi to join a previously arranged tour from Germany through East Africa going on a photo safari, and seeing Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and including visiting the shores of Lake Victoria. It was great to see the wild animals in their natural habitats and the beautiful countryside.

In 1965, Adelma went back to Madrid for a year and found it to be tremendously different from her previous stay back in 1957 to 1959. There had been a post-war baby boom and Franco's complete control over the country had had profound effects on the country. Small cars were everywhere and driven by drivers who didn't seem to realize how dangerously fatal they could be. Things had gotten considerably more expensive. Whereas previously, people could have easily eaten at some of the finest eateries in the city, now they were struggling and a lot busier, often having to hold down more than one job just to stay afloat. Live-in maids, previously quite affordable, were now a thing of a part and new apartments no longer included a maid's room. There was a lot of construction going on in order to house the expanding population and replacing buildings lost in the civil war. The cities were a lot more crowded with and Adelma remembers billboards about town reading, "See what twenty-five years of peace have done for Spain." Adelma realized again the old saying, "You can't go home again" – change is a constant but it is nice to have wonderful memories. During this stay Adelma was visited by her mother and she took her to the caves at Altamira, Portugal, the Costa Azul, southern France including Nice, Monaco, Rome, Florence, Venice, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, then up to Paris and London, before returning to Madrid.

After all this travelling, Adelma finally came back to live in Houston, settling down to teach fifth grade at River Oaks Elementary. While she was taking a course at the University of Houston she noticed a familiar profile in the Student Center cafeteria. It turned out to be her old friend Walter! A year later in June they started dating and by August they were engaged and married by Thanksgiving!

## Profile: Adelma Graham (continued...)



▲ Adelma Graham (middle) between Studio artist Octavio Moreno and his wife Ariadna

That first summer Adelma took Walter in her Volkswagen for a three week trip through Mexico, practicing her Spanish.

Since then Adelma has taken several more international trips, including going back to her beloved Spain, visiting Valencia, Granada, Gibraltar, Seville, Cordoba, and Pamplona for the running of the bulls and enjoying the excitement of bullfighting. She fondly recalls being at the Hotel Madrid and being able to hear the *cante jondo* singers just as she could when she lived at Don Quixote Numero 1 all those years ago.

It was when Adelma had been settled in Houston for a while that she got involved with Houston Grand Opera and the Guild. She purchased season tickets for HGO in 1975,

which is also when she joined the Guild. A particular sweet memory that Adelma shared was when she was teaching elementary school, she was involved with the Texas Institute for Arts & Education. Through this institute, an opera singer would come to the class once a week for eight weeks giving the children exposure to music. Adelma had prepared her second graders to perform *Hansel and Gretel* and when she brought them to see the actual opera at the Cullen Theater, the second graders realized that they were performing "their" work and started singing along!

Adelma Graham has led a life that many merely dream of. She has been to dozens of places both near and far and spent time with peoples of all backgrounds. Adelma is very

glad she did all of this so soon after college because when she retired in 1992 she looked after her mother for sixteen years until she passed away at the age of 108 and 7 months. Now she is ready for experiences for this time of life, which do not include sitting in a chair, or at least hopefully not. This is why she enjoys volunteering for the Houston Grand Opera, meeting all the talented Studio artists, going to schools as an opera docent, and learning as much as she can about the operas she sees. Adelma's life experiences and her truly caring nature are all part of what has made her such a wonderful teacher and true asset to the Guild and to Houston Grand Opera.

Dear readers,

We hope you've enjoyed this special appendix of the Houston Grand Opera Studio Buddies Newsletter. If we have made any omission or errors, please accept our apologies.

If you have news to report about yourself or about a Studio member, alumnus/alumna, staff member, or Buddy, or if you have any comments or suggestions, please email Asad at [a\\_s\\_jafari@yahoo.com](mailto:a_s_jafari@yahoo.com)

Thank you,

**Asad S. Jafari**

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