

Times Remembered © 2006

By Dahris H. Clair

It was a typical, sweltering, humid day in New Jersey. It was August—the year was 1961. I had a late date—the only kind I could have, working 50-60 hours a week at Dan's Steakhouse in Wayne. I'd brought a change of clothes, did a fast makeover on my face, checked my hair. It was after eleven when I finally ran out the door.

Serving food wasn't my life's ambition—it was a means to an end. On my one day off I'd go to my singing lesson, do my laundry, grocery shopping—the usual mundane chores a single mother faces, but singing was my joy—my dream—my salvation. I'd been a church soloist from the age of fourteen—singing at fashion shows, weddings, charity balls, political rallies, a couple of TV appearances on Joe Franklin's Memory Lane and occasional gigs at supper clubs—whenever and wherever I had an audience.

That night, my date took me to the Two Bridges Inn. It was a lovely place in Lincoln Park, New Jersey. I knew the pianist there—Roy Rising, the best accompanist any singer could ask for. It was late by the time we arrived; only a smattering of patrons remained. They sat at a quiet table—we sat at the bar. Roy called me over and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. He asked me to sing. After a rendition of Un Bel Di, My Gentle Young Johnny, from "Tenderloin," a short-lived Broadway musical, and I Feel Pretty, I went back to my date. My teacher always impressed upon me not to do more than two or three. "Leave them wanting more," she'd say. The generous applause was manna for my soul.

Shortly afterwards, a woman approached me, put her arms around me and said, "My dear, your voice is thrilling. You belong to the world." Who, me? She must have had too much to drink, I thought. It was just me—Dahris Gordon, who would say that to me? Three gentlemen were with her. One of them asked me for my

name—said he'd like to "put it in the paper." Publicity is good for an aspiring singer so I gave it to him. I expected he was a writer for The Passaic Daily Herald or The Paterson Evening News. Then I forgot about it.

A few days later, a call came into the steakhouse for me. It was Charlie Kimmel, one of the owners of the Inn. He asked if I'd seen my article. I hadn't. He read it to me. The headline was: Talent Lurks in Jersey Inn, by Frank Farrell, New York World Telegram & Sun. The woman who hugged me was Betty Kean. Her friends were Lew Parker, Bill Deich and Harry Mayer, chief of talent and story selection for Warner Brothers. I was the headliner in with Jackie Gleason, Portland Hoffa, Brigitte Bardot, Kim Novak and others. I was floored. But that wasn't the only reason Charlie called. A talent agent had read the article and called him—wanted me to come in for an audition. His name was Harry Uflund, and he was with the William Morris Agency. I had Mondays off, so we arranged it for the afternoon. My pianist friend drove me into New York because I was afraid of getting lost in the big city. He played for me, was sure I'd be going places. Harry listened to my medley of three, asked if I'd come back. He had some people he wanted to hear me. Such ecstasy. I walked on a cloud. I wanted to be on Broadway— and dared to dream.

Dreams don't always come true. The date I mentioned earlier, reminded me I had three children—he wanted to get married. He laid it on the line: What did I want—a career, or a family life? I chose the second. I didn't give up the singing, kept on with the churches and sang in many community theater productions. The last one was Mame in South Florida. It's a cherished memory because the beautiful soprano began to fade due to a medical condition. It's all gone now, but every once in awhile, when I hear a lovely soprano voice, I remember—and I wonder—what if?

I read that Harry Uflund went on to represent many stars, Robert DeNiro among them. He's a movie producer now, and I'm an aspiring writer. There's still life in the old girl.

Dahris Clair