

MARGERY HARGROVE BELIEVED KILLED IN HOUSE FIRE

by Mary Jo Denton

Herald- Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 16 July 2010

A fire in an E. 1st Street home on Friday afternoon took the life of an occupant of the house, believed to be Margery Hargrove, 83, well known here for her many contributions to the arts in Cookeville.

The body of a wheelchair-bound woman was found in the burning house, and while firefighters and police believe the victim to be Mrs. Hargrove, who had been in poor health for several years, official confirmation of the identity must await an autopsy, Cookeville Fire Chief John Kendrick said late Friday.



Mrs. Hargrove lived alone in the one-story wood frame house, and she was unaccounted for following the fire, Chief Kendrick said.

A neighbor or a passerby saw smoke coming from the house about 12:30 p.m. and called 911.

"We arrived on the scene within two minutes and 44 seconds of the call, and smoke was coming out of the eaves and out a front window when we got there," Chief Kendrick said. "We made a quick entry, and Firefighter Lt. Chris Westmoreland, a paramedic, found a person there in the front room who was deceased."

Most of the fire damage was in the front room, though heat and smoke damage was found throughout the house, Chief Kendrick said. The cause of the fire was still not known late Friday afternoon, but Chief Kendrick said it appeared to be an accidental fire.

He said it could not be determined as of late Friday when the victim died in relation to the fire. He said the cause of death is not known.

"We don't know if she died before the fire started or after it started. There had been health care workers there earlier in the day and it doesn't appear there was anything out of the ordinary."

He said the small house was "pretty airtight" and said that may have been a factor in how long the fire had been underway when someone outside noticed it. He said the house was equipped with smoke detectors, but said firefighters were unable to determine whether they had been working.

He spoke of the tragedy of death in a house fire and also commented that "if this victim is Mrs. Hargrove, I know that she was a very important mainstay in the arts in this community."

He said he and 13 firefighters, Cookeville Police officers, Putnam Ambulance medics, State Fire Marshal Agent Greg Whittaker, and coroner Dr. Sullivan Smith worked at the scene for several hours.

"All the crews did an excellent job, working in the sweltering heat at the scene of this tragedy."

House fire claims life of Margery Hargrove

by Mary Jo Denton

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 17 June 2010

COOKEVILLE -- A woman known for her contributions to the arts in Cookeville died in her home on Friday afternoon, as fire spread through the small house on East 1st Street.

Margery Hargrove, 82, lived there alone and had been in ill health for some time. She was confined to a wheel chair, and Cookeville firefighters said when they entered the burning house just after 12:30 p.m.

Friday, they found a person inside who was deceased, Fire Chief John Kendrick said.

But official identification of the victim will not be made until an autopsy is completed, Chief Kendrick said. However, Margery Hargrove was unaccounted for after the fire.

Kendrick said a neighbor or a passerby called 911 at 12:32 p.m. Friday and reported seeing smoke coming from the house. Within two minutes or so, firefighters from all four city fire stations arrived on the scene and made a quick entry to the burning house, Kendrick said.

Most of the fire damage was contained in the front room, where the body was found, he said.

But the cause of death was not immediately known, nor was the cause of the fire, he said.

"We don't know if this death happened before the fire started or not," Kendrick said.

Health care workers and others visited Margery Hargrove every day, and reportedly a care giver had been there not long before the fire was noticed by someone passing by.

Sarah Holloway, a friend who visited regularly, said she stopped by to see Mrs. Hargrove around 10 a.m. Friday and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"She was watching 'The View' on TV," Holloway said. "I asked her how she was, and she said, 'I'm a sick woman.' She didn't look well at all. But everything (in the room) seemed normal."

Holloway said she asked her friend if she could bring her anything for lunch.

"I was on my way to the store. I asked her if she liked grilled salmon and she said yes, and I made plans to fix that for her lunch one day soon."

Kendrick said on Saturday that the cause of the fire remains under investigation by the Cookeville Police Department and the State Fire Marshal's office "simply because this was a fire involving a death."

Hargrove was well known here for her work as director of numerous theater productions and for her contributions to the arts in general. She had many friends and fans who deeply appreciate all that she did.

Hargrove leaves lasting legacy in arts-theater community

by Charles Denning

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 18 June 2010

COOKEVILLE -- The curtain has closed. The footlights are dark. The audience has filed out. Their applause echoes after them in the stillness of the night.

Out front on the marquee, in large black letters, it says: "Thanks, Marge, and goodbye."

And below that: "Break a leg, wherever you are."

If you ever met Margery Hargrove, you still remember her. A short woman like a cheerful muffin with straight white hair and a smile that sparkled like champagne.

If you ever acted in her stage productions or hammered sets together or ran the lights or painted backdrops or sewed costumes or put up posters -- if you ever worked with her at the weekend Coffee Houses at the Wesley Foundation in the 1960's and 70's or, in later years, on Cookeville Leisure Service projects, then you are one of the hundreds and hundreds in this community and scattered all across the country who feel today as if you are missing a limb from your body.

Marge's life ended two days ago in a fire at her home on East First Street, but that life leaves a legacy that

casts a shadow that extends to the horizon and beyond. Friday night, just hours after her death, just a few yards from her charred house, as Cookeville Children's Theatre opened its annual summer schedule with a production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella, a moment of silence was observed in tribute to the founder of Children's Theatre -- yes, Margery Hargrove.

And then the curtains swung open and the lights went up on the stage in the Margery Hargrove Auditorium of the Cookeville Performing Arts Center where Marge directed big-time Cookeville Summer Theatre musicals from the time of the center's construction in 1979 until she retired in 1992.

While Marge promoted all the arts with a fierce energy and intelligence -- which were just about the only resources she possessed in this world -- she focused her passion on the theatre. She was the actor whose heart was in performing -- that's what drove her from Tennessee to New York City as a mere girl. But back in Tennessee in the early 1960's, when her husband and the father of her son became fatally ill with leukemia, she found that if there were going to be stage plays in the very small town that Cookeville was then, she would have to start from ground level.

She began with the Tennessee Tech Players.

Afterward, championed by Bob Lewis, Tennessee Tech campus minister at the Wesley Foundation, she single-handedly began a series of plays at the Foundation on East 9th St. It would be up to her to organize, to audition, to direct, to oversee set construction, to arrange publicity -- to do everything she could herself and to reach out to others for help -- and when it became necessary to arrange a few hundred dollars financing, go to the bank and borrow the money on her own signature.

A more unfavorable set-up for stage productions would be hard to imagine than the head-bumping basement of the Wesley Foundation. But in 1968, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, made a community-wide star of a 16-year-old Cookeville high school student, Kaul Fincher, and began to make a name for Marge Hargrove as a dramatist.

Then came *Our Town*, also starring young Miss Fincher; Arthur Miller's politically important drama, *The Crucible*; and after construction of the Wesley Foundation's Arena chapel-theatre, there were *Inherit the Wind*, which remains a relevant statement for our time; and *A Raisin in the Sun*, using black actors on the Cookeville stage in a serious drama, perhaps a first; and a string of others.

It was in 1968 that Marge, encouraged by many in the Cookeville community, really stuck her neck out. She went to Tommy Lynn at the old First National Bank on the Courthouse Square and borrowed some \$800 to fund a musical production at the then-new Cookeville Community Center, which, unlike the Wesley Foundation basement, actually had a stage down front.

Finian's Rainbow -- a mild message musical about racial tolerance -- played to enthusiastic audiences and became an eye-popping success, thanks to Kaul Fincher and George King and others. Man, it was like Broadway had come to Cookeville, you know!

After *Finian's*, there was no stopping. Not for 25 seasons, abetted by a move to the new Cookeville Drama Center for its grand opening in the summer of 1979 with the famed *Camelot* and for 13 summers after that, concluding with *Music Man* in 1992.

When the Drama Center auditorium was named in her honor in 1989, Cookeville City Council passed a resolution which sums up much of what Margery Hollister Hargrove meant to this town and this region and hints at the sleeves-up, earthy, salty side of her personality:

"Whereas, while Marge's gruff commands and intense demeanor have nearly scared the wits out of many an aspiring actors and crew members, her honesty, humor, compassion and talent have also won their love and respect."

In an interview with Cookeville writer Sarah Holloway some years ago, Marge capsuled her life's credo in

a quotation from Shakespeare: "This above all, to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

In her final years, Marge had lived alone, sometimes still grieving the death of her son, Tom, in 2007, at the young age of 53 but taking consolation in grandson Conor as he advances through his teen years.

She was an invalid, confined to her home, no longer able to wheel around town in her Volkswagen Bug. She was assisted out of bed in the morning by a home-health nurse using a rack and pulley device and returned to bed at 10 at night. During the day, day after day, she sat in a wheelchair beside a large wooden, paper-strewn desk, facing a TV set that seemed to be turned on, volume high, all the time, occasionally glancing up from the mystery she was reading, taking a drag on her ever-present cigarette.

You seldom visited her but that another visitor was leaving as you arrived or arriving as you left through her never-locked door.

Perhaps the last person to visit her was friend and fellow-mystery reader Sarah Holloway who dropped in about mid-morning Friday.

Marge sat in her wheelchair and, after a stay in the hospital two months ago, still didn't seem to feel well, said Sarah. She said she was all right -- she always said that. She said she didn't need anything -- she always said that.

But, with an oxygen line feeding into her nose, she said something which struck Sarah as unusual for Marge. She said, calmly, "I'm a sick woman."

Thanks, Marge, and goodbye. Break a leg, wherever you are.

Editor's note: Send your thoughts on Margery Hargrove to editor@herald-citizen.com

Community mourns death of Margery Hargrove

Margery Hargrove

Several Cookeville citizens are mourning the death of Margery Hargrove. The 82-year-old arts advocate made a lasting impression in Cookeville. Here are some of the things our readers have to say about Ms. Hargrove.



We have not only lost one of Cookeville's greatest art pioneers, we also lost one of Cookeville's great citizens. Her influence and aspirations will be felt for generations and generations.

Ty Kernea

Back in the mid and late 1960s and on into the early 1970s I had the good fortune to be in a number of plays directed by Margery Hargrove. I shall never forget those days of good fun and learning about drama and the stage. But I guess my fondest memories of Margery came on those evenings when all of us who looked upon her as some Bohemian guru who -- sakes alive! -- had actually performed on stage in New York City -- stayed up all night reveling in that atmosphere.

On many occasions a number of us would gravitate to Margery's little apartment on West 7th Street and stay up most of the night playing college bowl, password, reading plays and discussing how we might change the world for the better. Someone would always manage to bring some bootleg cheap wine to these gatherings, and we all would have a merry time as only college students can have at that stage in their lives.

Along about midnight, someone would persuade Margery to read some poetry to us. There she would sit in her large favorite chair, and we would all gather around on the floor like ancient Greek students huddled around the great Socrates.

Dramatically, Margery would, with arm extended, imitate Edith Sitwell and sing out "Still falls the rain." Someone -- usually me -- would shout for the New York poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Margery from memory would sing-song "We were very tired, we were very merry,/We had gone back and forth all night on the Ferry." And for a few moments we all felt like we'd been transported to where we wanted to be: on that Staten Island Ferry.

When the wine ran out, when it was two or three in the morning, we would all reluctantly leave for our apartment or dorm, high and happy, because once more Margery had transported us into the world of the big stage. That was a happy time in my life, and often over the next 40 years Margery and I would sit in her little apartment and reminisce about those days. That's the way we were back then. As long as I live, not a day will pass that I won't think about Margery and the great times we had when we were young.

She had a gift for seeing and refining the talents of others. In her time on the stage of Cookeville's history, she was a star, and her gift enriched us all.

Hal Denton

Margery Hargrove had one of the toughest and one of the most tender hearts of anybody I ever knew. I can't remember when I came to know her well enough to call her my friend, but I learned a lot about her when I interviewed her for this paper in June of 2003.

I didn't really know her during her active years in community and theatre and my memories of her will always be as I saw her the first time and on the last day of her life -- sitting in her wheelchair behind her desk, surrounded by books and papers and posters and cards and cigarettes ...

I loved the passion she felt for doing things right whether it was how to open a book or write a sentence, and I loved that in spite of all the years she spent in that wheelchair, I never heard a self-pitying sentence from her mouth.

She cooked and sewed and stayed interested in others and in what was going on in the world right up to the last months of her life. We both loved mysteries and movies and certain TV shows -- TV was a lifeline to her -- and talking about the ones we liked or hated.

I'll never forget her and I'll never read another mystery (she kept me supplied with books and her views of them) without remembering her. Marge -- you were the best -- you were a good'un.

Sarah Holloway

Wow. When I read about Marge's death, the first thing that came to mind was, that it had never occurred to me that she wouldn't be alive forever, and the second was that now she was in a place where she could walk, and act, and now she could shake her finger, straight and without arthritis, at whoever she wanted.

My first memory of Marge was that she didn't like me very much. She considered me a threat when I came to Cookeville, and was not altogether happy when the Drama Center board of directors was disbanded and the facility and staff brought under the Leisure Services Department umbrella. It took her a year or so before she realized I was mostly, usually, on her side in trying to make the arts stronger in Cookeville. Along with Rick and Chad and all the other staff that worked at the Drama Center, our goal was to take the work she had started and make it even better, and I think-hope-she realized and understood that by the time we had the re-dedication of the facility and the City Council named the performance hall in her honor. Marge's gruff exterior hid an enormously large heart. I remember being at a picnic at Cane Creek Park for the WCTE Auction volunteers, and my daughter Kelly was with me and I introduced her to Marge and she

said, very matter-of-factly, that The Music Man was already in rehearsal and she expected Kelly to be at rehearsal. And that introduced Kelly to Summer Theater. I wonder how many hundreds of times that kind of story could be repeated by people in the community.

I lost count of my visits to her, either to get her counsel, check on her, or just talk. Charles Denning was correct in his column, it was rare when someone wasn't either coming or going while I was there.

Every community has icons. Some good, some bad. Margery was a Cookeville icon and one of the best.

Brad K. Chambers

My heartfelt thanks to Charles Denning for his remarkable, insightful tribute to Margery Hargrove. Margery was my teacher, mentor, director and friend for 47 years, well, most of my life.

I first met Margery when I was in the sixth grade as a young actor in a play that she was directing for our Girl Scout troop. She volunteered her time to help us all earn our drama badges, and, of course, we passed with flying colors. I learned to love theatre at an early age, and Margery's influence has truly inspired my life.

I had wonderful opportunities to learn performance in Cookeville under Margery's tutelage. When it came time to make decisions about my own career path, I knew that it had to involve theatre and my love of the arts. Now, after 30 years of teaching drama, I do believe that my own choice to share theatre experiences with others was meant to be my mission, a mission that was originally sparked and lovingly nurtured by Margery Hargrove.

Margery and I always kept in touch, by phone, letters, and many visits. She challenged and inspired me. Although her later years forced physical limits, Margery's spirit and soul remained lively and interesting.

The Dan Fogelberg song, "Leader of the Band," reminds me of Margery every time I listen to it. Fogelberg's lyrics to describe his own mentor go like this: "His blood runs through my instrument, and his song is in my soul. My life has been a poor attempt to imitate the man. I'm just a living legacy of the leader of the band."

Margery led the parade for so many of us, and her incomparable legacy lives on. I'll miss her advice, compassion, intellect, talent, humor and voice. But most of all, I'll miss my friend.

Kaul Fincher Bluestone

What I learned from Marge:

Margery Hargrove was a dear friend and mentor of mine for many years. Here are a few things that she taught me:

1. That "SHUT UP!!!" is not a "bad word" and you can actually be struck dead by making noise backstage or laughing at your lines during a performance.
2. That you should prepare for old age and save for your retirement.
3. That you should surround yourself with books, especially mystery novels.
4. That on Sunday night, you watch whatever Masterpiece Theatre is playing on PBS.
5. That you do not have to have a computer, Facebook or Twitter access to keep up with your friends. A telephone or the US Postal Service works just fine.
6. That it is not pronounced "git." It is pronounced "get."

7. That you are never too old to watch American Idol.
8. That you should keep abreast of the news by reading the newspaper, watching CNN and The View, and you should always vote.
9. That even though your sister gets all of the leading parts, it's much more fun to be in the chorus or have a minor role.
10. That a life of service to your community is your responsibility and is priceless.

Thanks, Margery, for the memories. I will carry your wisdom with me always! I miss you! Peace.

Alice Fincher Kilgrew, chairman, Margery Hargrove Legacy Fund and loving friend

My heart hurt today as I read of Margery's death.

I first met Margery and her sister, Mary Beth years ago when they came to the Clara Cox Epperson Library on Dixie Avenue where I worked.

They were students at Tennessee Tech and I was just barely in high school.

Though I was in a much lower grade of school than they were, they always had a big smile and conversed freely with me and made me feel "so important".

When the library moved to East Spring Street, Margery continued her visits to the library, talking often with Miss Clara Starnes, the librarian and my aunt.

Margery was a good person, who had a bubbly personality and though we didn't meet up as often when we reached our "Golden Years," I loved and appreciated her for the influence and encouragement she gave me in the world of art.

There'll never be another one like her -- she was just so special!

Herald-Citizen, TN: 19 June 2010

Margery Hargrove Obt.

COOKEVILLE -- Margery Hargrove, 82, of Cookeville, died Friday, July 16, 2010, at her residence.

The family has chosen cremation.

A memorial service will be held at a later date.

Hooper-Huddleston & Horner Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

Herald-Citizen, TN: 21 June 2010

Margery Ann Hargrove Obt.

COOKEVILLE -- A final curtain call/celebration of life service will be held in memory of Margery Ann Hargrove, 82, of Cookeville, Saturday, Aug. 7, in the Margery Hargrove Auditorium at the Cookeville Performing Arts Center at 2 p.m. Immediately following the service a reflective gathering will be held at the TTU Wesley Arena Theatre on 9th Street.

Mrs. Hargrove passed away Friday, July 16, 2010, at her home.

She was born Sept. 14, 1927, in Chicago, Ill., to the late Dr. Paul Livingston Hargrove, professor of biology and cytology at Tennessee Tech University, and the late Mildred Lenore Ellingson Hollister, a homemaker and elementary school teacher.

Mrs. Hargrove's contributions to Cookeville's arts and leisure community have rightfully earned her wide appreciation and the honorary title of "Cookeville's First Lady of Theatre."

She attended schools in Nashville, graduating from East High School. She was a 1949 graduate of Tennessee Tech and also graduated from Tennessee Tech in 1965 with a master's degree in history, the first ever conferred by the university. Prior to returning to Cookeville due to the illness of her husband, Murrey Nalin Hargrove, in the early 1960s, she and Murrey lived in Nashville, New York, and Palo Alto, Calif. He was a soldier, scholar, actor and published poet; she a professional actress, starring in Broadway/off Broadway plays with then little-known actors such as James Earl Jones and Martin Sheen.

Mrs. Hargrove was associated with the Cookeville Tennessee Tech Wesley Foundation, directing her first play, "The Diary of Anne Frank" in 1964, and continued to be a pivotal play director and mentor of TTU students during the tenures of campus ministers Rev. Bob Lewis and Rev. Dave McIntyre. She invented and directed Cookeville Summer Theatre, starting with "Finnian's Rainbow" in 1968 and ending with "The Music Man" in 1992. She was pivotal in forming The Cookeville Arts Council, officially chartered in May 1972, along with the farsightedness of then-Mayor Bobby Davis, Mrs. Reba Bacon, Dr. James Wattenbarger, Mrs. Joan Derryberry, Dr. William Schrader, Hal Denton, Dr. Wayne Pegram and Dr. Kermit Breen. She served as its chairman for 10 years.

In November of 1977, ground was broken at Broad Street and Walnut Avenue to begin a public safety-theatre complex which still stands today and is now known as the Cookeville Performing Arts Center. In 1989 she was honored with a Cookeville City Resolution naming the former "Drama Center" auditorium the Margery Hargrove Auditorium. She was also fundamental in the founding of Cookeville's annual Fall Fun Fest and was on the ground floor in the establishment of Cookeville Leisure Services.

Mrs. Hargrove received numerous awards from The Tennessee Arts Commission, Cookeville Arts Council, Cookeville Tomorrow Program, Tennessee Recreation and Parks Association Arts and Humanities Award and the JC Penney Golden Rule Award. She also served as the Grand Marshall of Cookeville's Christmas parade in 1991.

Her family includes a grandson, Conor Murray Hargrove of Gallatin; a brother and sister-in-law, Don and Gloria Hollister of Asheville, N.C.; a sister and brother-in-law, Mary Beth and Keith Sargent of Hermitage; four nephews, David and Dan Hollister, Leslie Sargent and wife Marcia and Sandy Sargent and wife Marie; and three nieces, Donna Lebman and husband Jim, and Holly and Isabela Sargent.

In addition to her parents and husband, she was preceded in death by a son, John Thomas Hargrove.

Memorial donations may be made to The Margery Hargrove Legacy Fund, c/o The Wesley Foundation, 271 East Ninth St., Cookeville, TN 38501. (931-526-4353)

Hooper-Huddleston & Horner Funeral Home (931-526-6111) is in charge of arrangements.

Herald-Citizen, TN: 25 June 2010

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

MEMORIAL EVENT SATURDAY FOR MARGERY HARGROVE
by Mary Jo Denton

COOKEVILLE -- Friends of the late Margery Hargrove will gather in the auditorium named for her at the Cookeville Performing Arts Center this Saturday, Aug. 7, to celebrate the life of this city's "First Lady of the Theater."

She died tragically in a fire at her home here on Friday, July 16, at the age of 82.

Saturday's presentation will include songs and music, memories, readings and words of gratitude and appreciation from a few of the many hundreds who knew her and loved her during the course of the past half century. It will begin at 2 p.m. and is open to the public. Everyone, those who knew her and those who did not, will be welcomed.

In life, Marge reached out her heart and hands and drew people to her -- rich, poor; young, old; black, white.

Although no longer visible to our eyes, Marge will be watching the stage intently from the back of the auditorium on Saturday afternoon, yellow pad before her, pencil racing as she makes notes critiquing what she sees and hears. She will be just as much a powerful presence as she was for the dozens and dozens of stage productions she directed in this community during her long, much-honored career.

Like many careers, hers began by chance in Nashville in the fall of 1949 when a tiny seed fell on fertile ground in her imagination.

Born in Chicago on Sept. 14, 1927, she finished East High School in Nashville in 1945 and came to Cookeville with her parents when her father, Dr. Paul Hollister, was employed as a biology professor at Tennessee Tech.

She enrolled at "TPI" -- Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, as the university was then known -- and graduated with a B.A. in 1949.

That fall, a friend brought a young man to her 22nd birthday party and introduced him to Marge. It was love at first sight for both her and Murrey Hargrove, Marge said later. A native of Cookeville, he was a student at Peabody College in Nashville.

Murrey was beginning rehearsals for a role he had in a Nashville Community Theatre production, "The Mad Woman of Chaillot." Marge hung around the theatre. The director noticed her, offered her a small walk-on part, she took it -- and that was her first role in a play except for a junior high school comedy.

One night the director, whom Marge greatly admired, planted the little seed that was to stick in her mind and pilot her destiny. He said to her: "You've got something, kid!"

That was it. That's what it took. Those four words became her North Star.

In the summer of 1950, the Korean War started. The Army called Murrey.

Marge moved from Nashville back to Cookeville and got a job. As soon as she had saved \$100 besides the cost of a bus ticket to New York City, she caught Trailways out of Cookeville. On her lap she held a copy of the ancient Spanish novel, "Don Quixote," about an idealistic country man who lives in his dreams and one day sets out from home to do battle with windmills and other fancied enemies in his quest to make the world a better place.

Marge had no burning desire to be a star, she said. She just wanted to live among those who were stars, among those who wrote the plays, the poems, the books.

She was young, she wanted the thrill of being out there in the world of ferment, excitement, creativity -- and that wasn't Cookeville, Tennessee, in 1950.

When Murrey was discharged, he joined Marge in New York and they were married there on Feb. 22, 1952.

Both worked day-jobs. In off hours, Murrey wrote poetry and plays and Marge studied drama at Columbia University, took acting lessons and played roles ranging from soap opera to the Little Theatre, a prestigious Off-Broadway company.

Their son, Tom (named for an acquaintance, the famed Welsh poet Dylan Thomas), was born in 1953. As a toddler, he developed bronchial problems, and the family moved to warmer, drier Palo Alto, Calif.

Marge and Murrey became part of the Beat scene -- poets, writers, artists -- then at its peak in the coffeeshops of San Francisco. She, who loved reading poetry, sometimes read aloud to audiences at the storied 'hungry i' coffeehouse accompanied with jazz by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Together they marched in Ban-the-Bomb demonstrations.

After two years, though, their longing for New York City pulled them back east and they continued their lives as bohemian "starving artists." Looking back, decades later, she said, "We were desperately poor. Desperately poor."

In 1962, during a routine physical for a job he was seeking, it was unexpectedly discovered that Murrey had leukemia. The family returned to Cookeville; Murrey died in April 1963.

Meantime, Marge had been asked to direct the newly-organized Tennessee Tech Players and, after a season there, she was recruited by the campus minister at the Wesley Foundation, the Rev. Bob Lewis, who felt a need to expand that student ministry into arts and culture, particularly play production.

At the same time, she had enrolled in graduate school at Tennessee Tech and, in 1965, she received the first master's in history awarded at the university.

At Wesley, she did "The Crucible," Arthur Miller's controversial drama written as a rejection of McCarthyism and upholding freedom of thought. She did the heroic "Diary of Anne Frank." "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial." The poignant, profound "Our Town." And as the years marched along, many others.

In 1968, Marge yielded to a growing chorus of people in the community who were captivated by her serious, small-scale dramas but who also yearned for spectacular Broadway musicals. They wanted to see them, wanted to be in them, wanted to help put them on.

So, Marge -- who had never had anything to do with a musical and always claimed to be "tone deaf" -- sashayed way, way out on a long, long limb. OK, she would do "Finian's Rainbow," a long-running Broadway musical dating from 1947, and then see what happened.

She went to the bank, borrowed \$800 on her own slim credit -- and, wadda-yuh know? -- "Finian" grossed \$823 plus applause and encouragement worth thousands.

Cookeville Summer Theatre suddenly grew legs. Marge had promised that if "Finian" did not fail, "South Pacific" would be the next musical the next summer -- and so it was.

For 28 summers, from "Finian's Rainbow" in 1968 to the more sophisticated "Guys and Dolls" in 1995, Broadway's musical theater dazzled and delighted Cookeville audiences.

Margery Hargrove, the kid who had "something," channeled that something not into acting but into directing -- and into those associated tasks that go into putting on grass-roots plays with shoe-string budgets in small towns. She did venture onto the stage herself once to take part in one play at the Wesley Arena, also an Arthur Miller drama, "A View From The Bridge" -- a role for which she won Best Supporting Actress in a Nashville Circle Theatre production years earlier.

Although it was the "deep" plays into which she poured herself heart-and-soul, it is the musicals for which she is most widely remembered. Much greater audiences, many more people involved on-stage and off -- and the songs that people bookmark their lives by.

Marge won numerous awards, received many honors. In November 1977, on the same day that Cookeville Mayor Bob Poteet and the City Council broke ground for construction of the Drama Center (now the Performing Arts Center), the Tennessee Arts Commission presented her a "Certificate of Merit." Poteet said the arts commission could not have chosen a better person for the award.

This, Marge said at the time, "meant more to me than an Academy Award."

She had produced her highly popular musicals first in the auditorium of Putnam Senior High School, then at the Putnam Community Center and, finally, in the summer of 1979, the Drama Center was completed and Summer Theatre moved into a place that had been designed for it -- "a real theater," as Marge called it. It was like discovering Shangri-La. "Camelot," appropriately, was the first production.

Summer Theatre had found a home. Margery Hargrove had found her home. A major career as an actress had eluded her but she had gone out into the world beyond the horizon and she had come back to Cookeville and brought a corner of that magical world back with her. Awaiting her, like birds in a cage, eager to test their wings, was a range of talented actors, singers, dancers, painters, musicians, carpenters, sawyers, nail-drivers...

It's a well-worn expression, but Marge Hargrove was indeed "a people person." In a newspaper interview in 1991, she said: "Cookeville Summer Theatre is people, plain and simple. It takes three elements to put on a successful play -- the people on stage, the people backstage and the people in the audience."

She used to say that, as she watched a play in rehearsal, if a scene gave her "goosebumps," she knew it worked -- knew it spoke to her heart.

To think of her life -- of how she reached out to each and all, of her generous spirit, of the civic contributions she selflessly made, of her cut-loose laugh and her sock-'em opinions, of her sewing and knitting and embroidering, of her reading mystery novels by the boxful, of her mouth-watering cooking from pumpkin pies to saffron rice chicken and her taste for a drop of the grape -- yeah, the goosebumps do pop up.

One gloomy spring day some years ago, when her thoughts had turned to if's and might-have-been's, this starry-eyed traveler with "Don Quixote," said: "I don't know, I wonder if it's all been for the good."

Then, after a moment: "I guess I have brought a lot of pleasure to a lot of people."

Yes, Marge, yes.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 4 August 2010

FATAL HARGROVE FIRE RULED ACCIDENTAL

by Mary Jo Denton

COOKEVILLE -- The July fire which apparently took the life of Margery Hargrove, a leader in the Cookeville arts community, was caused by an electrical short in an extension cord.

And Hargrove, 82, most likely died of smoke inhalation from that fire, though autopsy results have still not been completed or made public, officials said last week.

Cookeville Fire Chief John Kendrick told the Herald-Citizen on Friday that the fire which spread quickly through one area of the small wood frame house on E. 1st St. on July 16 has been ruled accidental.

It was caused by an electrical short from an overloaded extension cord which ran along the floor and was frayed, Chief Kendrick said.

"This cord was a light weight cord and it ran across the floor behind her desk where she often sat in her wheel chair, and we believe that each time she moved the chair behind the desk or out from behind it, the wheels ran over that cord and caused it to fray," he said.

He said a lamp, a fan and an oxygen machine were plugged into the cord. He said the fire, which started in the floor area behind the desk, quickly reached a nearby bookcase which held "old mail and loose papers" on the bottom shelf.

"A fire like that will spread quickly, especially in an area where there is paper, and it can double in size every minute," Chief Kendrick said.

Hargrove, who was in poor health and confined to a wheelchair, lived there alone, but care givers and friends stopped in frequently.

One caregiver had been there that morning and had not been gone long when the fire was reported. Both that caregiver and a friend who had visited around 10 a.m. reported that everything seemed normal when they left the house.

The fire was spotted by a passerby about 12:30 p.m. that day, and firefighters were on the scene within two minutes of being called. They found the front room of the house on fire and found Margery Hargrove in her wheel chair in the area near her desk. She was dead, apparently from smoke inhalation.

"We have not yet received all the medical information from the autopsy, but from everything we can tell, it is most likely that smoke inhalation was the cause of death," Chief Kendrick said.

Her death was mourned by her many friends and admirers who followed her work as a drama director and arts advocate here for the past several decades.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: October 2010

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