

# “The Mother of Us All”: (Og)Reta McNeill, Canada’s First Professional Music Librarian

By Kathleen McMorrow

## Abstract

This paper presents extensive new biographical information, assembled from newspaper articles, about Ogreta McNeill, Canada’s first professional music librarian: pianist, singer, teacher, single mother, Toronto Public Library branch director, writer and bibliographer, impresario, founder and first chair of the Canadian Music Library Association.

The early accomplishments and influences of her formative years in Victoria BC offer were fully realized in her later identity as a generous contributor to the wider musical community.

## Article

The article about Ogreta McNeill originally written for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, now incorporated in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*,<sup>1</sup> consists of a paragraph of about 150 words and a brief bibliography. The two most recent items in this bibliography are a tribute on her retirement in 1968 written by John Beckwith,<sup>2</sup> and a funeral eulogy from 1993 by Helmut Kallmann.<sup>3</sup> By taking advantage of the digital availability of historical newspapers and journals, it is now possible to shed more light on the personality and accomplishments of this professional pioneer.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ogreta-mcneill-emc>.

<sup>2</sup> John Beckwith, “A Tribute to Mrs. Ogreta McNeill,” *CMLA Bulletin*, July 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Kallmann, “In Memoriam: a Pioneer Music Librarian,” *CAML Newsletter*, 21, no. 3, (1993).

<sup>4</sup> An earlier form of this paper, a pandemic lockdown project, was presented on June 7, 2021, at the virtual conference of the Canadian Association of Music Libraries on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



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Ogreta McNeill settled in Toronto in the autumn of 1935, arriving from the west coast as a young widow with a toddler and a widowed mother.<sup>5</sup> She established herself as a piano teacher and vocal performer. For example, she sang at a meeting of the Women's Missionary Society of Sherbourne United Church in early 1936,<sup>6</sup> gave a recital at the Toronto Conservatory of Music with her friend, pianist Kathleen Irwin,<sup>7</sup> and performed for a Speranza Musical Club meeting in 1937.<sup>8</sup>

In 1938, she sang at the Rosedale home of the socialite Mrs. R.Y. Eaton, accompanied by David Ouchterlony,<sup>9</sup> at that time organist of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. She became the soprano soloist in that choir,<sup>10</sup> and through the 1940s appeared in the annual performances at St. Andrew's of *Messiah* and the *Christmas Oratorio*.<sup>11</sup>

In 1942, she joined the music section of the Toronto Public Library (TPL), and in 1944 became its head.<sup>12</sup> The Music Collection, established in 1915, was the first subject section of TPL and was housed at the west end of the central building at St. George and College. In 1948, there were newspaper articles about its holdings of books, scores, and choral parts, including Ogreta McNeill's remarks about the wide range of users of the collections.<sup>13</sup>

Since her son Jerry was high-school age by then, and she was also supporting her mother, there may have been financial reasons for Ogreta McNeill's move into full-time employment. She chose a field in which her generous personality and musical intelligence would make a real impact, and she gave it her full commitment.

She added to her education, completing the University of Toronto B.Mus. in 1952 and graduating from Library School in 1953, with her bibliographical study, *Music in 19<sup>th</sup> century Toronto*. She became active in the Ontario Library Association and in the music section of the Canadian Library Association. In the summer of 1955, she was one of a select nine-member Canadian delegation headed by the national librarian, W. Kaye Lamb, which travelled to the Brussels Congress of the International Federation of Library Associations for a meeting with the International Association of Music Libraries and the International Federation for Documentation.<sup>14</sup> The December issue of the *CLA Bulletin* that year was devoted to the Congress and published her report on the IAML sessions.<sup>15</sup> In the April 1956 issue of the *Bulletin*, she summarized the findings of a CLA-sponsored

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<sup>5</sup> "Social and Club Interests," *Victoria Daily Times*, October 21, 1935.

<sup>6</sup> "Women's Organizations," *The Globe*, April 21, 1936.

<sup>7</sup> "Chancellor Entertains," *The Globe and Mail*, March 11, 1937.

<sup>8</sup> "Speranza Musical Club," *The Globe and Mail*, April 23, 1937.

<sup>9</sup> "Former Ontario Premier," *The Globe and Mail*, February 9, 1938.

<sup>10</sup> "Recital at St. Andrew's Sunday Evening," *The Globe and Mail*, January 16, 1943.

<sup>11</sup> Display Ad, "St. Andrew's," *The Globe and Mail*, December 14, 1946.

<sup>12</sup> "Library seeking Canadian Songs," *The Globe and Mail*, February 6, 1948.

<sup>13</sup> "Fears Canuck Songs may become Extinct," *The Globe and Mail*, February 6, 1948.

<sup>14</sup> "Ottawa Scene," *Globe and Mail*, August 6, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> "The Brussels Congress, 1955," *Canadian Library Association Bulletin* 12 (December 1955): 98-107.

survey of music in 80 Canadian public libraries, with examples of establishments large and small.<sup>16</sup> She described their holdings, coverage of local sources, and their facilities and staff, then offered useful criteria for the development of public music collections. She had already given some detailed guidance in an earlier published article.<sup>17</sup>

After World War II, Canadian cultural nationalism had become a force, expressed most memorably in the 1951 Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (the Massey Report). Looking back now, we can regret the absence of Indigenous or otherwise diverse Canadians in this process. The resulting cultural organizations, some still with us, were established on European or Anglo-centric patterns; in music, these were the Canadian Music Council headed by Ernest MacMillan, the Canadian League of Composers, the Canadian Music Journal, and the Canadian Music Centre.

Then in June 1956, in Niagara Falls, at the annual meeting of the Canadian Library Association, Ogreta McNeill, Helmut Kallmann, and Jean Lavender formally founded the Canadian Music Library Association.<sup>18</sup> Ogreta McNeill was chair in the first years, acting as liaison with the Canada Council, and presiding again in 1964-65. The major hotels in which CLA met across the country were appropriate facilities for the concerts which were the major activity of CMLA at these conferences. The 1967 program in the Chateau Laurier ballroom was a concert and dance, “cabaret style,” titled “Centennial music of 100 years.”

In the new CMLA, the cultural nationalist impulse generated a series of highly labour-intensive booklets attempting to document the country’s musical resources. Ogreta McNeill was the originator of some of these publications and a contributor to all of them:

- 1958 - Standards for music collections in medium-sized public libraries;
- 1961 - A bio-bibliographical finding list of Canadian musicians and those who have contributed to music in Canada;
- 1964 - Union list of music periodicals in Canadian libraries;
- 1965 - CMLA Centennial “Data sheets” project which eventually became the Union Catalogue of Canadian sheet music to 1950;
- 1966 - A survey of music collections in public and university libraries in Canada; Setting up and staffing a Music Library;
- 1967 - A selected list of music reference materials; Musical Canadiana: a subject index to vocal and instrumental pieces

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<sup>16</sup> “Music collections in Canadian Libraries,” *Canadian Library Association Bulletin* 12 (April 1956): 170-74.

<sup>17</sup> “Basic Music Collection for a Small Public Library,” *Ontario Library Review* 39 (August 1955): 199-202.

<sup>18</sup> Helmut Kallmann, “CMLA / CAML: 15 plus 25 Years of Flourishing,” 24, no.3 (1996): 9.

In April 1959, her day job at the TPL entered a new phase. The Music Library moved to Howard Ferguson House, former home of the Ontario premier, on the corner of Avenue Road and St. Clair Avenue.<sup>19</sup> At the Central Library, Mrs. McNeill had initiated a series of chamber music events;<sup>20</sup> her new space included a proper small concert hall. Each week during the month of June, she produced four concerts funded by the Musicians Union, with prominent performers such as pianist Mario Bernardi, flutist Nicholas Fiore, violinists David Zafer and Morry Kernerman, and cellist Marcus Adeney.<sup>21</sup> She was proud of the expanded collection of recordings in the new facility, and in July and August she broadcast concert music into the garden and adjacent park.<sup>22</sup> In October, she organized a recital by Jan Rubes, accompanied by George Brough, of songs by Ernest MacMillan, Healey Willan, and other Canadians.<sup>23</sup> In November, she welcomed to the building the office of the Canadian Music Centre and its collection of scores by members of the Canadian League of Composers.<sup>24</sup>

A feature article in the *Globe and Mail* in February 1960<sup>25</sup> started with her observations about the interest of young people in music other than rock and roll, and the intense use of library scores and recordings reflecting interest in local opera, ballet, concerts, and radio broadcasts. It outlined her career, centring on her enthusiasm for Bach, but also noting her interest in entertaining, gardening, and needlework. A second article in September 1960, is more specific about the size, depth, and breadth of the collection.<sup>26</sup> Mrs. McNeill is quoted again on its usefulness and relevance to young people, and the reporter mentioned enthusiastic remarks by several local high school students. There was one divergent opinion: Norman Snider, in Grade 12 at Lawrence Park, complained, "It needs a good collection of jazz." Snider went on to a career as a journalist and cultural commentator, whose work included writing on jazz and appeared regularly in newspapers and magazines. Mrs. McNeill responded that she did not plan to form a jazz collection, since many jazz fans didn't take care of records, and replacement costs would be unjustifiably high. According to the *Globe and Mail*, her opinion of rock 'n' roll was even more unfavorable. "It's not music and we don't stock it. Would you expect the book library to keep comic books? After all, we have our standards."

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<sup>19</sup> "Library Music Branch is Opened," *Globe and Mail*, April 20, 1959.

<sup>20</sup> "Music Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, May 10, 1958.

<sup>21</sup> "Music Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, May 30, 1959; June 6, 1959, June 13, 1959, June 20, 1959.

<sup>22</sup> "Lunch-hour Tape Recitals," *Globe and Mail*, June 27, 1959.

<sup>23</sup> "Music Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, October 17, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> John Kraglund, "Music in Toronto: Canadian Centre Achieving Aims," *Globe and Mail*, November 4, 1959.

<sup>25</sup> Jo Carson, "Says Demand is Growing for Music Data," *Globe and Mail*, February 3, 1960.

<sup>26</sup> "Music Library May Hook You on Classics," *Globe and Mail*, September 3, 1960.

She may have been playing up to the interviewer, or she may have later changed her tune. In 1968, John Beckwith wrote, "In discussing her attitude to pop music and show tunes with me, she once remarked that no library can keep pace with the current 'top forty,' yet whenever I examine the collection I notice that books and discs in these two areas are constantly updated."<sup>27</sup>

She continued organizing concert series in the Music library. In 1961, Tela Podoliak performed all the Beethoven piano sonatas.<sup>28</sup> In 1962, there was a Debussy series with pianist Stuart Hamilton.<sup>29</sup> In 1963, a variety of performers explored Schubert song cycles,<sup>30</sup> and in 1964, the piano music of Brahms.<sup>31</sup> The little hall was used by the Women's Committee of the Toronto Symphony,<sup>32</sup> of which she was a member, for the preview lectures before concerts, with speakers ranging from Udo Kasemets,<sup>33</sup> flag-bearer of the avant-garde, through conductor Walter Susskind,<sup>34</sup> and of course, John Beckwith.<sup>35</sup> There were also meetings of the Women's Committee of the Mendelssohn Choir,<sup>36</sup> in which she still sang.

Ogreta McNeill retired in 1968, having made her library into a centre of community musical life and having established standards for librarianship in music. She maintained her musical friendships, as past president of the Pro Arte Orchestra,<sup>37</sup> a musical contributor to the Heliconian Club,<sup>38</sup> and vice-president of the Zonta Club,<sup>39</sup> She gave the opening address at the 1981 conference of CAML<sup>40</sup> and wrote articles for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.<sup>41</sup> When she died in 1993, Helmut Kallmann wrote a tribute, calling her the "mother figure of Canadian music librarians," which was read at her funeral and published in the *CAML Newsletter*.<sup>42</sup>

How did Ogreta McNeill become this remarkable person? Here are her own words, from the opening paragraph of her April 1956 survey report:

Many years ago a youthful piano student happened on a shelf of music volumes at the Victoria Public Library and diffidently took home a book of Schumann's songs as a change

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<sup>27</sup> John Beckwith, "A Tribute to Mrs. Ogreta McNeill," *CMLA Bulletin*, July 1968.

<sup>28</sup> "Pianist Podoliak to Tackle Sonata Cycle of Beethoven," *Globe and Mail*, January 14, 1961.

<sup>29</sup> Haworth, Frank, "Stuart Hamilton Shows Control of Debussy," *Globe and Mail*, February 14, 1962.

<sup>30</sup> Haworth, Frank, "Voice Colourful but Tenor Needs More Training," *Globe and Mail*, April 24, 1963.

<sup>31</sup> "Music Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, April 4, 1964.

<sup>32</sup> "Continue TSO Support, Women Urged," *Globe and Mail*, December 4, 1962.

<sup>33</sup> "Today's Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, February 1, 1963.

<sup>34</sup> "Music Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, March 14, 1964.

<sup>35</sup> She had been his first piano teacher in Victoria in the 1930s, personal communication to author.

<sup>36</sup> "Today's Calendar," *Globe and Mail*, January 25, 1962.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Brunton, "This Week in the Social World," *Globe and Mail*, November 30, 1961.

<sup>38</sup> "Carrying on the Club Tradition of Singing," *Globe and Mail*, December 15, 1967.

<sup>39</sup> "Zonta Annual," *Globe and Mail*, April 25, 1967.

<sup>40</sup> "Programme," *CAML Newsletter*, 10, no. 1 (1981): 6

<sup>41</sup> "Toronto Mendelssohn Choir," "Victor Di Bello."

<sup>42</sup> Helmut Kallmann, "In Memoriam: a Pioneer Music Librarian," *CAML Newsletter*, 21 no.3 (1993).

from her daily scales and sonatinas. Here was a treasure trove indeed, and all of her own finding, for who would expect to discover music in a library? That same piano student now presides over the Music Division of a large public library and feels rewarded whenever she hears that note of delighted discovery in the voice of some searching borrower who has stumbled on similar treasure unexpectedly, or indeed, stumbled on the music itself, since many people still do not expect to find music in a library.

Eva Mary Ogreta Ormiston was born on August 2, 1903, in Cape Breton, to a master mariner and his wife; they moved to Victoria soon afterwards. Her father built a career as a captain of Canadian Pacific coastal cargo ships working from Seattle to Alaska. Her parents had two more daughters and a son. Ogreta, or Reta as she was known then, first came to the attention of the *Victoria Daily Times* at the age of 10 for her recitations at the closing exercises of South Park School in December 1913.<sup>43</sup> From then until her final removal to Toronto, her name appeared in the Victoria or Vancouver newspapers over 250 times, documenting her musical progress from teenaged organist at her church, or in her teacher's piano recitals in the Empress Hotel, through two years at Victoria College, to opening her own piano studio, through her many performances with the Ladies Musical Club, to her final professional west coast vocal appearances in 1935.

When she was in her twenties, it was the nineteen twenties, and even in seemingly remote and quiet Victoria, there was a social and musical whirl. In the first six months of 1925, her participation can be followed in the local press, through reports of her performances as a singer, dancer, piano soloist, accompanist, and chamber musician.

On January 12, at a party for the fourth anniversary of the founding of the Kumtuks Club (later known as the Victoria Business and Professional Women's Club) she contributed piano solos and accompanied a dancer.<sup>44</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, she herself danced in an exhibition of advanced pupils in the studio of Madame Varda.<sup>45</sup> At the end of January, her father died suddenly at the age of 50.<sup>46</sup> She didn't appear in public again until February 20, playing a short piece in a Rachmaninoff program at the Victoria Conservatory.<sup>47</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> she was an accompanist in an evening organized by the Ladies Musical Club.<sup>48</sup>

On March 9, at the next Kumtuks Club meeting, she accompanied a singer.<sup>49</sup> On Wednesday, March 11, she was on radio CFCT playing Glinka in a piano trio along with a solo Rachmaninoff Valse, probably the one she played on February 20<sup>th</sup> at the Conservatory, and probably no. 2 of the

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<sup>43</sup> "Closing Exercises in City Schools," *Victoria Daily Times*, December 19, 1913.

<sup>44</sup> "Kumtuks Celebrate Fourth Birthday," *Victoria Daily Times*, January 12, 1925.

<sup>45</sup> "Exhibition by Dancing Pupils," *Victoria Daily Times*, January 22, 1925.

<sup>46</sup> "Veteran Seaman Died Here To-Day," *Victoria Daily Times*, January 29, 1925.

<sup>47</sup> "Russian Composer Inspired Concert," *Victoria Daily Times*, February 23, 1925.

<sup>48</sup> "Ladies' Musical Club Entertained Aged Women's Home," *Victoria Daily Times*, February 28, 1925.

<sup>49</sup> "News in Brief," *Victoria Daily Times*, March 9, 1925.

Morceaux de salon, op. 10.<sup>50</sup> On the following Saturday, she played a piano solo in a concert reception in the Empress Hotel, arranged by the local chapter of the IODE to celebrate the 82<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the founding of the city. It was attended by the Lieutenant-Governor, the Premier, the Mayor, and the Chief Justice.<sup>51</sup> The Empress Hotel, in the Inner Harbour, Victoria, had opened as a Canadian Pacific Hotel in 1908. By 1920, it was a tourist destination, and the social and entertainment centre of the city.

On March 20, there was a church anniversary concert, including her piano trio ensemble, at Hampshire Methodist, where she had been an active member since childhood.<sup>52</sup> She assisted a lecturer on Mendelssohn at the Victoria Conservatory on April 17, playing the solo Andante and Rondo Capriccioso, op. 14, and movements from op. 49 with her piano trio.<sup>53</sup> On April 18, there was a large group picnic by ferry to James Island; the entertainment lasted till after midnight. Included among all the comic and vaudeville numbers described in the newspaper, Reta “received much applause for her splendid work in several piano solos,”<sup>54</sup> A couple of days later at the “Home Products Fair” attended by 5,000 people, she accompanied a dancing exhibition by Madame Varda.<sup>55</sup>

On April 28, she played several solos at a concert given in Sidney, on the tip of the peninsula, for the North Saanich IODE chapter.<sup>56</sup> On May 12, in Memorial Hall for the Victoria Schubert Club, she played duets with a local violinist.<sup>57</sup> The annual recital of her own piano students at the Conservatory in mid-June was reviewed favourably; she was congratulated on “her intelligent, consistent leading of her young pupils through the difficult pathways toward sound musicianship.”<sup>58</sup> On June 24, she played Liszt’s virtuoso Concert Etude no. 3 in D flat, Un Sospiro, at Knox United Church, as a break in a vocal recital by junior pupils of her friend and teacher Mary McCoy Jameson.<sup>59</sup>

In the periods before and after these six months, Reta’s datebook was just as full. Immersed in teaching, learning, and performing music for her community, her character and strengths were formed, becoming the basis of the values and projects she advocated and initiated later in life.

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<sup>50</sup> “Daily Radio Programmes,” *Victoria Daily Times*, March 11, 1925.

<sup>51</sup> “Chapter Observes City’s Birthday,” *Victoria Daily Times*, March 16, 1925.

<sup>52</sup> “Anniversary Concert,” *Victoria Daily Times*, March 21, 1925.

<sup>53</sup> “Mendelssohn Music Theme of Lecture and Programme,” *Victoria Daily Times*, April 18, 1925.

<sup>54</sup> “St. Mary’s Belles at James Island,” *Victoria Daily Times*, April 25, 1925.

<sup>55</sup> “Many Attend Final Night of Products Fair,” *Victoria Daily Times*, April 27, 1925.

<sup>56</sup> “Sidney News,” *Victoria Daily Times*, May 1, 1925.

<sup>57</sup> Display Ad “The Schubert Society of Victoria,” *The Daily Colonist*, May 10, 1925.

<sup>58</sup> “Pupils’ Recital is Much Appreciated,” *Victoria Daily Times*, June 24, 1925.

<sup>59</sup> “Pupils’ Recital was Enjoyable,” *Victoria Daily Times*, June 25, 1925.



In October 1927, there was a pause, and then many changes of dynamics. She married<sup>60</sup> Charles Elwood McNeill, a young businessman who had recently been appointed to manage the Shell Oil facility in Nanaimo, about 100 km north of Victoria.<sup>61</sup> This move interrupted her musical life, but a year later her husband was promoted to run the Victoria plant<sup>62</sup> and she fully resumed her teaching and performing. Another year later, in November 1929, McNeill was again promoted, to the Vancouver offices.<sup>63</sup> Their son Jerry was born in Vancouver in October 1930. And then, a few months later, after what was described on the front page of the *Victoria Daily Times* as a serious operation after a lengthy illness, Charles McNeill died.<sup>64</sup>

Ogreta McNeill retreated to the family home on Island Road in Victoria, where her mother would share her son Jerry's upbringing.<sup>65</sup> She returned to teaching in August,<sup>66</sup> resumed her regular work as an accompanist, developed a more prominent presence as a vocal soloist, and soon became a director of the Victoria Musical Arts Society, successor to the Ladies Musical Club.<sup>67</sup> In July 1932, she received her Toronto Conservatory of Music Associateship in solo piano with first class honours.<sup>68</sup> In July 1933, after, and perhaps even inspired by a lecture by a visiting Ernest MacMillan,<sup>69</sup> she moved to Toronto for two years of study at the TCM with Viggo Kihl.<sup>70</sup> Her husband had left an estate of more than \$9,000;<sup>71</sup> with this amount in 1933, one could build a new house in Victoria, buy 15 cars, or even live in Toronto for two years.

In July 1935, the *Times Daily Colonist* was delighted to announce Ogreta McNeill's return to Victoria.<sup>72</sup> But she had decided on a different direction, and embarked on what was really a farewell tour, with half a dozen performances as a pianist, or as a vocalist in recital with her friend, pianist Kathleen Irwin,<sup>73</sup> before a final appearance at the tea hour in the Empress Hotel on Saturday,

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<sup>60</sup> "Oak Bay Wedding Pretty Ceremony," *Victoria Daily Times*, October 10, 1927.

<sup>61</sup> "Local Boy Promoted to Nanaimo Plant," *Victoria Daily Times*, April 9, 1927.

<sup>62</sup> "Charlie McNeill to Manage Shell Firm," *Victoria Daily Times*, October 22, 1928.

<sup>63</sup> "Personal Items," *Victoria Daily Times*, November 9, 1929.

<sup>64</sup> "Chas. E. M'Neill, Native Son, Dies," *Victoria Daily Times*, March 26, 1931.

<sup>65</sup> "In Memory of Charles Gerald McNeill <https://www.sweenyfuneralhome.ca/book-of-memories/2246327/mcneill-gerald/obituary.php>

<sup>66</sup> Display Ad, "Ogreta McNeill Announces the Reopening of Her Pianoforte Studio," *Victoria Daily Times*, August 29, 1931.

<sup>67</sup> "Musical Art Society Doing Splendid Work," *Victoria Daily Times*, April 21, 1932.

<sup>68</sup> "Victorians Pass Music Exams," *Victoria Daily Times*, July 26, 1932.

<sup>69</sup> "Radio Affects Music Studies," *Victoria Daily Times*, June 14, 1933.

<sup>70</sup> "Pianiste to Give Recital," *Victoria Daily Times*, July 13, 1935.

<sup>71</sup> "McNeill Will Probate Sought," *Vancouver Daily Province*, June 12, 1931.

<sup>72</sup> "Popular Pianist Returns," *The Daily Colonist*, July 10, 1935.

<sup>73</sup> G. D. B. "Ogreta McNeill and Kathleen Irwin Give Artistic Performance," *Victoria Daily Times*, September 14, 1935.



September 21, 1935.<sup>74</sup> In October, her mother and son joined her in Toronto,<sup>75</sup> where she began a new career of enriching the musical life in that city.

Ogreta McNeill's early discovery of "musical treasure" in the Victoria Public Library had marvelous consequences. With the addition of academic qualifications to her original talents as a pianist, singer, and teacher, she created a new identity for herself – library director, writer, bibliographer, impresario – and for us, as founder of our professional association.

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<sup>74</sup> "Social and Club Interests," *Victoria Daily Times*, September 23, 1935.

<sup>75</sup> "Social and Club Interests," *Victoria Daily Times*, October 21, 1935.

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