

The Two Wills of the Heiress Huguette Clark

By Anemona Hartocollis

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With flawless etiquette, every year from 1977 to 2010, Katherine Hall Friedman sent a Christmas card to the home of her distant relative Huguette Clark, a copper heiress whose father was once one of the richest men in America. She never got an answer.

For many of those years, Mrs. Friedman, a branding consultant known professionally as Carla Hall, lived just across Manhattan, an easy taxi ride or a meandering walk through Central Park from Mrs. Clark, who died in 2011 at 104, but she never tried to meet her.

Why not stop by? “I was brought up to believe that she was a private person,” Mrs. Friedman said recently in a sworn deposition, “and that everybody in the family respected her privacy. I never expected to meet with her.”

Now, that very privacy has been exploded by a court case brought by 20 of Mrs. Clark’s grandnephews, grandnieces, great-grandnephews and great-grandnieces, including Mrs. Friedman. They are challenging the disposition of her estate, which has been estimated at more than \$300 million.

In 2005, Mrs. Clark executed two wills, just six weeks apart. The first, signed in March, would have given virtually all of her fortune, including possession of her Santa Barbara, Calif., oceanfront estate, Bellosguardo, to members of her family. The second, signed in April, cut them out with a nasty Dickensian flourish: “I intentionally make no provision in this my Last Will Testament for any members of my family, whether on my paternal or maternal side, having had minimal contacts with them over the years. The persons and institution named herein as beneficiaries of my Estate are the true objects of my bounty.”



Huguette Clark when she was about 37.
The Estate of Huguette M. Clark, From the Book "Empty Mansions"

In that version, the lion’s share of the estate — the lavish Bellosguardo, along with furnishings, musical instruments, books and art — would be turned into a foundation for the arts. There would be gifts to, among others, her goddaughter; her primary doctor, Henry Singman; her accountant, Irving Kamsler; her lawyer, Wallace Bock; and Beth Israel Medical Center in Manhattan, where she lived for the last 20 years of her life. Mrs. Clark’s longtime nurse, Hadassah Peri, would receive her rare doll collection and 60 percent of whatever was left — potentially millions — after the other bequests were made. (Mrs. Peri also received more than \$31 million in property, cash and gifts outside the will, according to court papers.)

The will, which was drawn up by Mr. Bock with Mr. Kamsler's input, names both men as executors and, with her California lawyer, directors of the new foundation.

The relatives are contesting that will, claiming that Mrs. Clark was coerced into changing it by people around her, who, along with the hospital, kept her dependent and exploited her age and vulnerability. The beneficiaries, however, say she was a stubborn, strong-willed woman who did only what she wanted to do.

If settlement talks fail and the case goes to trial — jury selection is scheduled to begin Sept. 17 — it will touch on issues that many families face. How is wealth transferred in later generations? What does an elderly person owe relatives who hardly knew her and did not take care of her in her dotage, as opposed to the hired help who did? Do family ties still bind between people who have never even met?

But what sets this story apart is the sheer size of Mrs. Clark's fortune, and the singularity in which she ended her days: living at Beth Israel and paying her own way, as though it were a long-stay hotel. For much of that time, many of her relatives did not know where she was.

Mrs. Clark belonged to an American kind of royalty. There are indications that she reveled in her social stature as the youngest daughter of William Andrews Clark, a copper magnate who bought himself a United States Senate seat from Montana in the 1890s. She put herself in a league beyond the Town & Country set, according to a deposition. She preferred a French magazine chronicling the exploits of royals around the world, *Point de Vue*.



Mrs. Clark, a copper heiress who died in 2011 at 104, in a self-portrait. The Estate of Huguette M. Clark, From the Book "Empty Mansions"

She grew up in California, France and in her father's gilded 121-room mansion at East 77th Street and Fifth Avenue, since demolished, which had art galleries, a theater and a swimming pool.

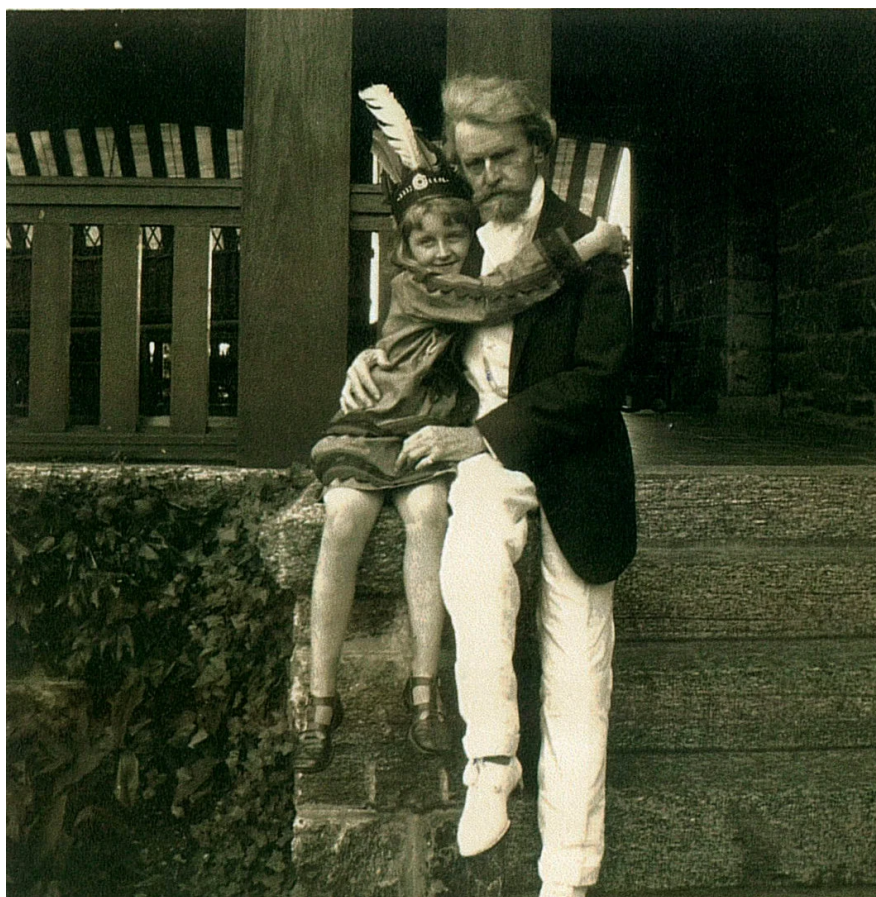
She was married in Santa Barbara in August 1928 and obtained a Reno divorce in August 1930, charging desertion. She had no children. Her only sister, Andrée, died at 16. All of her would-be heirs are her half-relatives, the descendants of her father and his first wife. They declined to be interviewed before trial.

But documents trace a family whose ranks have devolved from industrialist to Junior League member to a consultant on other people's wealth and in the youngest generation, a public-school teacher.

In pretrial proceedings, huge amounts of energy have been spent establishing whether each of the 19 living relatives contesting the second will had ever met or spoken to Mrs. Clark, and if so, when and for how long.

The answers are sometimes comical. Clifford R. Berry III, known as Kip, a veterinarian in Florida and a scion of a horse-breeding family who is in his 50s, never met Mrs. Clark. Others say they saw her in 1945, 1954 or 1957. The last time any of them remembers having seen her in public seems to be in March 1968, at the funeral of Mrs. Friedman's grandmother at St. Thomas Church, on Fifth Avenue. Mrs. Clark greeted her bereaved half-sister, Mrs. Friedman's great-grandmother, and other elderly relatives, then left.

That they stayed at a remove did not mean the family did not care, or should not inherit Mrs. Clark's money, John Morken, the family lawyer, said. It was a delicate balancing act.



Mrs. Clark with her father. The Estate of Huguette M. Clark, From the Book "Empty Mansions"

"Where's the boundary; when do you start to intrude; what's the proper role?" he said.

By many accounts, Mrs. Clark was a real-life Miss Havisham, a virtual spinster, alienated from most of her family, isolated in one candlelit room of her grand apartment on Fifth Avenue at 72nd Street, until she became so sick and emaciated that she was forced to go to the hospital.

Mrs. Clark arrived at the hospital in 1991 with skin cancer of her face that was so bad she could not hold food in her mouth, and that had carved "large deep 'rodent' type ulcers" where her lower right eyelid should be, according to notes by Dr. Singman. "She resembled an advanced leper patient," he wrote.

It is unclear from the record how long she had been sick, and whether her disfigurement had anything to do with her reclusiveness.

Mr. Morken, the family lawyer, has suggested that Mrs. Clark's refusal to go home once she had been treated showed that she needed psychiatric evaluation.

Harvey Corn, a lawyer for Mrs. Peri, told the judge that Mrs. Clark stayed at Beth Israel because she felt taken care of. "She loved her doctors and wanted them to be at her beck and call for the rest of her life," he said.

Dr. Singman was left \$100,000 in her will. But there was more. During a vacation in Italy, Dr. Singman fell down the stairs in his hotel and fractured his right hip. He flew home via Learjet. Mrs. Clark reimbursed him for the \$65,000 fare. When his beach house needed painting, she gave him \$20,000 to do it. He called her his "fairy godmother."



Katherine Hall Friedman, a distant relative of Mrs. Clark. Owen Hoffmann/PatrickMcMullan.com

Dr. Singman's lawyer, Harold Lee Schwab, said Mrs. Clark had good reason to feel grateful to his client. "There's no doubt he was instrumental in her survival until the ripe old age" of almost 105, Mr. Schwab said. "That's pretty good."

The potential heir who may have had the closest contact with Mrs. Clark was André Baeyens, a grandnephew and a retired French diplomat, now about 83, who wrote a book about Senator Clark, "Le Sénateur Qui Aimait La France." He never met her but kept in touch by phone for long stretches from 1977 to 2003, out of a genteel sense of *comme il faut*, according to his deposition.

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He left French fashion magazines with her doorman at 72nd Street, and she would call to thank him. He invited her confidante, Suzanne Pierre, the widow of Mrs. Clark's former doctor, to events at the French consulate, where Mr. Baeyens was consul general, and she would report back to Mrs. Clark, who would then call to chat.

Beginning in 2002, Mr. Baeyens said, their calls became more "perfunctory." Mrs. Clark could not hear, and she had trouble forming full sentences. "Her telephone conversations consisted of a few polite words," he said.

After that, he no longer tried to talk to her directly, though he continued calling Mrs. Pierre to check on her.

In the hospital, Mrs. Clark's caretakers became her surrogate family. Christopher Sattler, her personal assistant, got \$500,000 in her will. His job included picking up her mail and delivering business correspondence to her lawyer. Certain personal correspondence, like letters from her goddaughter, Wanda Styka, went straight to Mrs. Clark.



Hadassah Peri, Mrs. Clark's nurse.
Peri family, From the Book "Empty Mansions"

At Mrs. Clark's direction, Mr. Sattler would set up her dolls — vintage Barbies that he said came from Au Nain Bleu in Paris, or Jumeaux, which are expensive bisque dolls — and photograph them in her apartment. Then he would bring the pictures to her in the hospital. "She liked to look at them," he said.

She was not infantile, he said. "It is an inference that somehow that because she liked these Barbie dolls that there was something wrong with her," Mr. Sattler said, "and if you could have spoken to her you wouldn't think that."

He disputed the family's contention that she was being kept a virtual prisoner. "The time in the hospital actually resocialized Mrs. Clark — she became less of a recluse," Mr. Sattler said. "Not by much, but she enjoyed the traffic of humanity for the first time in 50 years."

Driven and passionate, Mrs. Friedman stands out as the Clark family representative in pretrial depositions.

Her mother, Erika, granddaughter of a German diplomat, married into the family and once described how joining the Junior League helped ease her way into American society.

Her husband, John Hudson Hall Jr., a portfolio manager and geologist, died in 1999 at age 73. His obituary emphasized his aristocratic lineage as the direct descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and, of course, of Senator Clark.



The family mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Mrs. Friedman, now 61, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Middlebury College. In 1977, she married Ben-Ami Friedman, a city planner. Her engagement announcement shows a young woman with an open face, a toothy smile and a curtain of straight blond hair.

She is principal of the Carla Hall Design Group in New York, a consultant in corporate branding. The Friedmans live in a town house on West 85th Street, now worth \$5.7 million, according to tax records. They have three children.

Senator Clark left a collection of more than 800 artworks to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, where they form the William A. Clark Collection, and Mrs. Friedman carried the flag there, succeeding her father as the family delegate to the museum. (Though the museum would stand to lose Mrs. Clark's bequest of a \$25 million Monet waterlilies painting if the second will were nullified, it is siding with the family in the dispute.)

In 2003 and 2004, Mrs. Friedman exchanged several e-mails with David Levy, then the Corcoran's president, according to pretrial papers. On May 6, 2003, just hours before Sotheby's auctioned off a Renoir owned by Mrs. Clark, an 1882 portrait of a French gentleman's wife sitting in her garden, Mrs. Friedman sent Mr. Levy a missive.

"I went and saw it this morning and it is spectacular," she wrote. "Do you know if she has (had) any intention to gift this to the Corcoran? Is she in touch with the Corcoran? I sure wish we could have this one but there may be more."

The painting was bought by Stephen A. Wynn, the Las Vegas casino owner and art collector, for \$23.5 million, the highest price at the sale.



Bellosguardo, Mrs. Clark's summer estate in Santa Barbara, Calif. John L. Wiley, From the Book "Empty Mansions"

Three days later, Mr. Levy responded that he had “some disturbing thoughts about the whole matter” of the Renoir. He wondered whether Mrs. Clark was being manipulated by her lawyer Mr. Bock, saying, “after all, the lady is 98 years old and it is almost a legal presumption that great care has to be taken by those handling her affairs (like Bock) not to exert undue influence in their own interests.”

Mr. Levy implied that he was tempted to do something but could not because the Corcoran had no legal standing.

Mr. Bock's lawyer, John D. Dadakis, said Mr. Levy's e-mail was a “disgraceful allegation” with no evidence to back it up. He said the Renoir had been sold, with Mrs. Clark's consent, to pay expenses.

At a series of lunches from 2004 to 2006, Mr. Baeyens, the French diplomat, told Mrs. Friedman that Mrs. Clark had no will and was living in a hospital. Mrs. Friedman seemed to take a renewed interest in Mrs. Clark around that time. In 2006, she sent handwritten New Year's greetings to her “Tante Huguette,” signing her note with a plaintive, “Carla (Erika's and John's daughter!).”

By that time, unbeknown to the family, Mrs. Clark's final will had already been executed.

In February 2007, Mrs. Friedman wrote that she would be visiting Santa Barbara and would like permission to visit Bellosguardo. “I have fond memories of visiting there in 1968 when I was 16 years old!” she wrote on her company stationery. In March, a one-day visit was approved, and in her deposition Mrs. Friedman recalled being “kind of awe-struck” by the property.

In October 2008, the Clark family descendants held a reunion at the Corcoran, inviting Mrs. Clark, who did not attend but helped pay for it. Instead, she was represented by her accountant, Mr. Kamsler, who around the same time pleaded guilty to attempting to disseminate indecent materials to minors, a felony. The reunion seemed to fuel their interest in her condition. (“We think it is totally irrelevant,” Robert Giacovas, Mr. Kamsler's lawyer, said of his client's conviction. “It is mudslinging by the family.”)



Mrs. Clark's former home on Fifth Avenue at 72nd Street. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

By then, Mrs. Clark had been in the hospital for 17 years, but most of her would-be heirs did not know where she was living.

Three relatives took the lead in reaching out to her: Mrs. Friedman; Ian C. Devine, a family wealth specialist, with whom she shared some business clients; and Karine Albert McCall, a writer. Mr. Devine was able to trace her to Beth Israel, where an operator confirmed that she was in residence. Mrs. Friedman said they wanted to make sure Mrs. Clark, who was then 102, was not on life support and was being well cared for. Once, Mrs. Friedman and Mr. Devine stood at the foot of her bed as she slept; the next day, they brought flowers but were roughly shooed away by Mrs. Peri, Mrs. Friedman said.

In 2010, after Bill Dedman, an msnbc.com reporter, began chronicling Mrs. Clark's life, Mrs. Friedman, Mr. Devine and Mrs. McCall asked a judge to appoint one of them as a guardian for Mrs. Clark, claiming that she was at risk of financial and personal abuse by her lawyer and her accountant. The judge dismissed the case, saying it was based on "speculative assertions." (Mr. Dedman has recently published a book about Mrs. Clark, "Empty Mansions," written with Paul Clark Newell Jr., a cousin who does not stand to inherit.)

A few days later, the three relatives drafted a letter to Mrs. Clark, according to an e-mail in the case.

"Since you do not know us, the three of us are representing the three lines of Senator Clark's great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren," the draft letter said. It cited the "horrific media stories" and said, "We felt compelled to make sure you are safe."

"You are a lovely lady and do not deserve any problems at all," the draft letter said. "Remember that we always think of you with our love and that if you ever want to see any of us, we would come at once."

Mrs. Friedman said she could not recall if they had ever found a way to deliver the message.

Susan Beachy contributed research.

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