

LADY INDOMITABLE

At 92 years of age, Oak Bay's Hilda Hale remains "She who must be obeyed"

She's been described as amazing, a dynamo, unpredictable, a going concern, a mover and a shaker, a soldier who soldiers on.

The words are inspired by a 92-year-old woman who recently became a writer and a publisher.

As I mount the stairs, Hilda Hale is already opening the front door to welcome me into her Oak Bay home. Her diminutive stature and slow shuffle are unexpected.

Times Colonist gossip monger Jim Gibson, dubbed Hilda "indomitable", a nickname that has endured.

"I always think of Hilda as being taller — larger than life, a statuesque woman leading the way," says Gibson.

Within the petite frame, however, exists a woman who has lived a remarkable life and shows no signs of quitting.

Hilda pre-dates her heritage home, which still boasts the original wallpaper. The floors are covered with Chinese carpets, and the walls with Chinese art. The art, many pieces created by Hilda herself, also functions to hide fingerprint smudges left behind by her grandchildren. The rooms are furnished with dark, ornate, imposing Chinese furniture. Her much-prized baby-grand piano graces her large, bright living room.

Hilda's book entitled "Indomitably Yours" was published in 1996. The book details her life in the Far East, where her now-deceased husband Bertram Hale was employed by Thomas Cook travel agency in the company's Peking office.

Among the stories she tells in the book is her account of the family's time spent in a Japanese internment camp outside of Weih sien, Shantung province, northern China.

The Hales, with their two young daughters, Hilary and Beryl, were living in Peking during the Second World War when the Japanese occupied China.

Hilda vividly remembers almost every day of the time spent in the internment camp.

"It's always with you," she recalls, "you can't get away from it. Every time I crack an egg for my breakfast or go to make a cake I think, good heavens, we only got one egg a month when we were in internment camp."

As remarkable as Hilda's book is, she had sent it to "half a dozen or more" publishers with no success.

She recounts one of her rejections.

"I've forgotten the man's name at the moment, a well known publisher in Vancouver. Heck, I was so mad with him I didn't want to remember his name because he wrote and said, 'we have glanced through your book and it has merit, but don't waste your time writing biographies unless you're world famous.' Nice letter to get that from a publisher."

Then she adds with laughter, "But you see, they take so long to read your manuscript and I'm 92 now. Heavens above, if they put it aside and pick it up two years later I'll probably be dead. No, there's a lot to be said for self-publication."

With her limited time-frame in mind, she chose self-publishing.

"Publishing didn't worry me," Hilda insists, "but distributing... you've got to get rid of them once you get them. I had 500 books stacked in my house."

In fact, she sold those first 500 copies in 10 months. She has moved on to promote the sale of the next 750 reprints.

Hilda worked from memory and her husband's letters and papers to bring her book together. She notes that her guest book, her "most precious and enduring" wedding gift, also helped to stimulate her memory.

Hilda's father was an engineer in the aviation industry and had moved his family to Canada from England. While Hilda was living in Montreal, she met Bertram who was in Canada on a brief visit.



CAROLE AUDET/OAK BAY NEWS

Hilda Hale — writer, raconteur, survivor.

"I had a bit of a shock. I died in hospital and they brought me back again. They put a pace-maker in. I don't feel it at all... keep going, dear."

Hilda Hale, indomitably

They corresponded after he returned to Peking to his position at Thomas Cook.

One letter included his marriage proposal.

Bertram's parents were staunch Brits and wanted their son to marry in England. Hilda's parents wanted her to marry in Montreal. Because of this lack of agreement, Hilda and Bertram decided to marry in Japan.

She considers her marriage in Japan to be the highest point in her life.

"I think that was a hoot," Hilda laughs.

She acknowledges having a short courtship with Bertram Hale, a fact the "Montreal papers made a hay day over..."

"[It was] a matter of hours really," she admits. "It was terribly exciting and I wasn't scared, strangely enough. Oh yes, my mother and father thought I was crazy of course."

Hilda shared a special bond with Bertram.

"We always had a lot of fun together," she says and doesn't hesitate to admit that her husband's death was the lowest point in her life.

"I've just written a chapter about it." (The chapter is included in a new book Hilda is writing about her life since her arrival in Canada in 1954).

"It took a lot of courage to write that chapter," she explains, her voice not quite as steady as before.

Another low point was the loss of her eldest daughter.

Hilary died four years ago, having contracted a relatively unknown disease which affected her kidneys. Hilda suspects the poor dietary conditions endured in the internment camp may be the source of this rare affliction.

Hilda herself had a near-death experience five years ago.

"I had a bit of a shock. I died in hospital and they brought me back again. They put a pace-maker in. I don't feel it at all."

Gently patting her chest where her pace maker resides, she jokingly urges it to "keep going, dear."

As well as spending time writing, Hilda spends much of her time working for the Asian Art Society, which she founded in 1976. Her love of Asian art is based on its traditional origins. She points out that she doesn't much care for the current Asian art exhibit of new modern Chinese paintings currently hanging at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

"There's nothing Chinese about them," she declares.

Hilda gives free weekly mah-jong lessons in exchange for donations to the Hilda Hale Bursary Fund. Hilda says the proceeds are, "for the furtherance of Asian arts... helping to print catalogues, children's art classes, anything to do with Asian art."

Joan Dale, a friend for more than 20 years through the Asian Art Society, says of Hilda, "she doesn't leave a stone unturned."

Characteristic of this, Hilda sent off a letter to the new Governor General of Canada, Adrienne Clarkson, inviting her to view the Asian art collection in Victoria.

Joan shares the story of giving Hilda a T-shirt inspired by a British television character, also bearing the name of Hilda, printed with 'She who must be obeyed'. Hilda, not at all offended by the T-shirt, wore it proudly.

Hilda approaches life with the attitude of the cup being half full.

However, she regrets outliving most of her friends, and sadly explains how her Christmas card list has dwindled from 300 names to a meager 20.

In spite of this, and true to her indomitable spirit, Hilda Hale will carry one, even when all the names have been crossed off her list.

Writer Carole Audet is a student at the Western Academy of Photography. Hilda Hale's book "Indomitably Yours" is available at Ivy's Book Shop.

Story and photograph by Carole Audet