

Edith Rockefeller McCormick

August 31, 1872 – August 25, 1932



PHILANTHROPIST, SOCIAL ARBITER, JUNGIAN ANALYST

Born in to one of the wealthiest families in the world and judged the richest woman in the United States during the 1920s, Edith Rockefeller McCormick was the foremost society leader in Chicago during the early 1900s. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the second daughter of John Davison Rockefeller, founder and owner of Standard Oil Company, and Laura Celestia (née Spelman) Rockefeller, a school teacher, abolitionist, and supporter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Baptist missionary work. The Rockefeller family moved to New York City when Edith was a young teenager. As a child and young woman, she loved intellectual pursuits: reading books, studying languages, and playing the cello. She was raised a devout Baptist as her parents wished. Shielded from public exposure, she was educated by private tutors until she attended Rye Academy, a girls' boarding school in New York.

On November 26, 1895, Edith Rockefeller married one of her brother's schoolmates, Harold Fowler McCormick, son of Chicago business leader Cyrus H. McCormick, inventor of the reaper, and Nettie Fowler McCormick. Harold went to work for his father's company, and the couple moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he was to train in the business by managing a branch. After spending two years in Iowa, the McCormicks returned to Chicago, moving into the forty-one room mansion (with magnificent gates purchased from the World's Columbian Exposition)

that had once belonged to Gen. Joseph Torrence on what was then (and now) referred to as Chicago's Gold Coast, an elite neighborhood on the city's Near North Side. Not long after, Harold purchased the property and Edith decorated it lavishly, displaying rare pieces of furniture and accessories throughout. She was an aficionado and connoisseur of fine jewelry, art, rugs, and antiques, and an important collector of rare books. The substantial maintenance and day-to-day affairs of the mansion required a staff of at least twenty servants.

The McCormicks had five children: John Rockefeller McCormick (1897-1901), who died at age four from scarlet fever; Harold Fowler McCormick (1898-1973); Muriel (1902-1959); Editha (1903-1904), who was sickly and died at 9 months; and Mathilde (1905-1947). As a memorial to their son John, the McCormicks founded the John McCormick Institute for Infectious Diseases in Chicago in 1903. Under the institute's auspices, a cure for scarlet fever was eventually discovered. Edith Rockefeller McCormick was vitally involved with the development of the institute, assisting with its architectural planning.

From her mansion with its sumptuous furnishings and priceless collections, Edith Rockefeller McCormick reigned as the queen of Chicago society in the early 1900s, taking over the role from Bertha Honoré Palmer, who preferred by that time to be either at her home in Newport, Rhode Island or her estate in Sarasota, Florida. There was no competition for Edith; she was by far the wealthiest woman in Chicago. She had the etiquette and poise of royalty, traits that qualified her as the first lady of the city. McCormick enjoyed entertaining guests from upper-class society, often including members of royal families, such as Marie, Queen of Romania and the Prince of Sweden. At her dinner parties, place cards were set out with guests' names written in gold; the menus were in French. Her dining room could seat two hundred guests. She enforced only one house rule: she did not serve alcohol in her home because she had made a pledge to her father on her wedding day that she would not do so.

Edith Rockefeller McCormick was easily able to fill the role of philanthropist as was expected of Chicago's social leaders, giving large sums of money and great amounts of time to many social and cultural causes. One of her earliest ventures into philanthropy was her support of Chicago's Juvenile Court system, established in 1899. Legislation authorized the appointment of juvenile probation officers as an arm of the Juvenile Court, but had not allotted funds to pay them. McCormick stepped forward to help fund the work of the probation officers.

In 1909, she began her support of the Art Institute of Chicago. That year the Art Institute's board founded Friends of American Art, a women's auxiliary that would provide funds for the yearly acquisition of works by American artists. Edith Rockefeller McCormick became a charter member of the group, making generous contributions over the years and lending pieces from her personal collection for exhibit at the Art Institute.

Much of her energy during the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, was focused on bringing opera to Chicago. Both she and her husband Harold were avid opera fans; and in 1909, along with other wealthy Chicago and New York opera lovers, they founded the Grand Opera Company, Chicago's first. Although Harold McCormick became the president of the board of the Grand Opera Company, Chicagoans agreed that Edith Rockefeller McCormick was the real force behind the company's popularity and growth. After a year of preparation and fund raising, the Chicago opera company opened its first season with *Aida* in November of 1910. Deeply involved from the beginning in furthering the company's cultural mission to make opera popular with a wide audience of Chicagoans, Edith Rockefeller McCormick encouraged the presentation of foreign operas in English and the search for operas written by Americans and with American themes. She underwrote many translation projects (which she often helped to translate) and American composers' works during the 1910s.

Edith Rockefeller McCormick also contributed to the spectacle of Chicago's opera scene. Whenever Edith, the grande dame of Chicago society attended the opera, it became common knowledge, and the shows were sold out. Her legendary pre-opera dinners were highlighted in the society columns of Chicago's newspapers. A stickler for schedules, her dinners were timed to the second so that she and her guests, chauffeured in her plum colored Rolls Royce, would be in their seats well before the opening curtain. Once seated in her box, she focused solely on the performance, making it clear that opera engaged the intellect and artistic sense. She also made it possible for people who could not otherwise afford opera to attend, inviting them as dinner guests, who would, of course, be accompanying her and her wealthier guests to the performances.

The Chicago Grand Opera Company, initially a financial and critical success, was in trouble by the 1913-14 season. Re-organized in 1915 under new management as the Chicago Opera Association, it was now directed by a board made up exclusively of Chicagoans and virtually dominated by Edith and Harold McCormick, its chief financial backers. The association, which lasted until 1922, continued to present exciting opera to Chicago. The McCormicks were influential in bringing such rising prima donnas as Mary Garden and Rosa Raisa to perform regularly. Even though Edith was living abroad in Europe for most of the Chicago Opera Association's life, she was, nevertheless very much involved in decision making about its direction and the choice of its leadership.

Edith Rockefeller McCormick's eight year stay in Europe was precipitated by a severe depression in 1912. As a young woman she had experienced what was then diagnosed as hysteria (anorexia nervosa) – a general weakness, exhaustion, lack of appetite, and consequent weight loss. She was successfully treated by the renowned neurologist S. Weir Mitchell. In her late thirties, her emotional turmoil reappeared, and after a stay at a health spa in New York,

she contacted Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who agreed to come to New York to consult with both Edith and her husband about their emotional conditions. Following a brief stay, Jung urged the McCormicks to travel to Zurich to be treated there. Edith left Chicago in April of 1913 for Switzerland accompanied by her son Fowler and her daughter Muriel. Harold and their daughter Mathilde joined them later that year. The trip was originally planned for only a few months; however, Edith remained until 1921.

Edith Rockefeller McCormick underwent an extended analysis with Jung, benefiting both emotionally and intellectually from crucial insights Jung gained during this period as he developed his psychological system. She studied his method intensely, becoming a Jungian analyst herself in the late 1910s, with a full time practice of more than fifty patients. At the same time, she pursued other intellectual interests, with private tutorials in philosophy and voluminous reading in comparative religion, archaeology, and psychology. Already fluent in French, German, and several other languages, she now began to study Sanskrit.

Edith and Harold McCormick's relationship to Jung went far beyond that of analysands to analyst. They encouraged and supported the development of Jungian psychology by forming the Psychological Club in 1916 in Zurich, purchasing and outfitting a building for lectures and meetings and where Jung's visiting students and colleagues could board. The club became a gathering place for Jungians, leading to the establishment of professional relationships among an international network of analysts. In order to disseminate Jung's ideas to a larger audience, Edith Rockefeller McCormick paid for his writings to be translated into English. The McCormick financial and personal contributions were indispensable during this early period in the promotion of Jungian psychology.

In addition to her support of Jung's work, Edith Rockefeller McCormick became a patron for several artists, including opera composer Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari and novelist James Joyce. Edith returned to Chicago in September of 1921, yet by that time her marriage, which had been shaky since the end of WW I, was over. She obtained a divorce on ground of desertion in December of that year. Harold Fowler McCormick had gone back to Chicago in 1918 to resume his responsibilities with International Harvester. In his wife's absence, he had begun a widely publicized affair with the Polish opera singer Ganna Walska, whom he married shortly after his divorce from Edith. Despite this, Harold and Edith remained friends for the rest of Edith's life – he would arrange for the delivery of a perfect rose on her birthday every year until her death.

Back in Chicago, Edith established a flourishing psychoanalytic practice, which attracted socialites from many areas of the United States. She dreamed of founding a psychoanalytic center at Villa Turicum, her Lake Forest estate, which had been built for her by the esteemed architect Charles A. Platt from 1908-1912. While studying with Jung, Rockefeller McCormick had become acquainted with a fellow student, Edwin W. Krenn, a Swiss architect. He returned

to Chicago with her to help prepare Villa Turicum with landscape and design plans – but the dream of a psychoanalytic center was never realized. Edith and Krenn became inseparable friends until the day she died. They spent much time together dining and attending cultural events, with Edwin Krenn *always* present as her escort to the opera. A favorite sight often reported by the papers was Edith's Rolls Royce arriving at the neighborhood Village Theater - she and Krenn emerging to catch the latest popular film while the chauffeur waited for them outside.

In 1923 Edith Rockefeller McCormick and Edwin Krenn became business partners, together with Edward A. Dato, a Swiss friend of Krenn who had lived in Chicago for many years and who was employed by International Harvester. The three partners launched a real estate firm with more than five million dollars worth of Standard Oil securities that Edith placed in a trust fund to underwrite the venture. The company's initial goal was to provide affordable housing for working class people. The firm acquired land parcels in the city and surrounding northern and western suburbs, building reasonably priced houses that sold quickly. It also bought up apartment buildings and offered low-rent units. By the mid 1920s the firm of Krenn and Dato was highly successful, becoming one of the nation's largest subdividers, with subsidiary corporations that managed property and provided engineering consultants.

In another effort to benefit the Chicago community, Edith Rockefeller McCormick donated several hundred acres in Riverside, Illinois, to establish the Chicago Zoological Gardens in 1922. Three years later, she helped fund the Woman's World's Fair in Chicago to celebrate women's achievements and acquaint them with the variety of careers opening up to them. The fair was held annually for four years, and Edith continued to support it financially and to serve on the fair's board of directors.

By 1929 the country's economic climate was changing from boom to bust, anticipating the Great Depression during the 1930s. Many real estate firms were in serious trouble, Krenn and Dato among them. Even McCormick's infusion of cash and securities was not sufficient to offset the firm's losses, and Krenn and Dato continued to lose money into the 1930s. Because of the deepening economic depression, homeowners in the firm's many subdivisions could not make their rent and mortgage payments. Understanding their deep financial distress, Edith allowed the company's tenants and homeowners to continue to live in their apartments and homes even though they could not afford to keep up payments. At the same time, she continued to maintain her personal lifestyle as always, acquiring more costly art and antique furnishings and ignoring the economic belt tightening measures necessary to save her real estate firm. In June of 1932, she had lost so much of her wealth that her father and her brother, John D. Rockefeller Jr., became worried that her losses would begin to affect the entire Rockefeller fortune. They insisted that she move out of her Gold Coast mansion and into the Drake Hotel to save money,

and they placed her on a strict allowance. Because it was the height of the Great Depression, Edith would not accept these demands, nor move until her entire staff had been permanently employed elsewhere.

By this time, Edith Rockefeller McCormick was in failing health, ill and bedridden. In 1930 she had undergone a radical mastectomy, but physicians were unable to remove the entire malignant tumor, and radiation therapy was in its infancy. She died of cancer just a few days prior to her sixtieth birthday. At her side were her three children, with whom she had reunited after many years of alienation; her ex-husband Harold (now divorced from Ganna Walska), and her closest friend and confidante Edwin, who had been included by the family to be present in her last hours. After a funeral service in the Empire Room of her Lake Shore Drive mansion, Edith was eventually buried in Chicago's Graceland Cemetery with her deceased children, John and Editha, on either side of her.

At the time of Edith Rockefeller McCormick's death, many bills remained unpaid. Her treasured collections of art, furniture, and jewelry were auctioned off to raise money to settle her estate. Everything was undersold in the depressed market following the 1929 stock market crash and the deepening economic decline of the Great Depression. Her estate, Villa Turicum, went through one failed development project after another until being offered to the city of Lake Forest as a gift; but the city refused it. Edith had hoped that both of her mansions would be turned into museums after her death, but they sold for very little and were eventually torn down. It took nineteen years for attorney, accountants and trust supervisors to settle her estate, once valued at forty to fifty million dollars. By 1951, when her estate was finally exiting probate, it still owed a half million dollars on unresolved claims.

Although much of her wealth was depleted by the time of her death, Edith Rockefeller McCormick's position as the reigning queen of Chicago society for the first third of the twentieth century was indisputable. She maintained, throughout the period, an extravagant way of life that provided society columnists a steady stream of stories with which they could dazzle readers. By the end of her life, when the nation was in the depth of economic depression, such a display of wealth was becoming inappropriate – a view she had come to hold herself. As one of her friends, author Arthur Meeker wrote, assessing her life a generation after she died; "Mrs. McCormick's death marked the end of an era. No one again could afford to live as she has lived – nor perhaps, even if they could, would they have wanted to" (quoted in *This Was 1000 Lake Shore Drive*). Yet Edith had an intellectual side that was as intriguing as her wealth and far less appreciated. As a valued colleague of one of the century's leading psychologists, as a serious student of languages, comparative religions, and philosophy, and as a lover of the arts who immersed herself in many facets of artistic production in order to enrich

Chicago's cultural life, Edith Rockefeller McCormick enthusiastically participated in many of the most important intellectual and cultural currents of her time.

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