

Lively t'ai chi practitioner is forever young

by Lisa Waterman Gray - *The Best Times* – December 2005

Winner, Honorable Mention for Profile, The Kansas City Press Club

If you heard about a 95-year-old woman who's thinking about teaching t'ai chi, you'd have to think you were hearing about a somewhat extraordinary person. You'd be right.

Oonagh (ooh-na_ Perdue celebrated her 95th birthday in October. She still has perfect sight and hearing and a voracious curiosity about life. In fact, Perdue's only ongoing physical complaint is a bad hip.

"It is such a joy to have perfect sight, to see what other people write about, and perfect hearing, so I can hear what people have to say," the Leawood (Kansas) resident said. "I like people who live in the now and look forward to the future.

"I still want to learn every day. My mind is open and I want to know what's going on in the world I enjoy people with good minds. If we use our minds properly, we can do miracles."

Perdue lives alone but socializes with friends who range in age from teens to seniors. Floral and abstract art in vibrant colors, and current books and magazines, fill her apartment.

Perdue practiced t'ai chi chih for more than three decades. She attributes much of her longevity and good health to this gentle practice of balancing the body's natural energy, or chi.

T'ai chi chih is a form of t'ai chi chuan that its originator, Justin Stone, simplified to make the movements easier for older people. It is said to improve balance, physical fitness, flexibility, and stamina, affecting the inner organs and muscle structure.

But Perdue lived a rich and varied life long before she discovered t'ai chi chih. She was born outside London in 1910, the year Haley's Comet appeared, to a physician father and a nurse mother who stopped her nursing to raise Perdue and her five older siblings.

In the mid-1930s, Perdue met her fiancé, who was also a physician. She followed him to Shanghai, where they married and had two children. The family often took holidays in Japan and, in 1941, left the country right before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"We were on the high seas, with plans to go to Australia and leave my husband in Singapore, where he would be a consulting physician to the British Army," Perdue said. "But we all got off in Singapore at a major hotel, because they said it was safe. In four days, we found a house and servants.

"However, the Japanese were coming south very quickly and there was no time to save anything. The girls and I were able to get on the last boat out of Singapore, with no idea of our destination. We arrived in Adelaide, Australia, where a family took me and the girls in because the hotels were full of servicemen. They opened their home to these refugees from Singapore."

Perdue and her family then went to a small board house while looking for a place to live. After that, they shared a house in Melbourne with a friend who was also a physician's wife, before returning to Adelaide.

"My first husband had died and it was toward the end of the war," Perdue said. "I met my second husband, Bill, in Australia, and he asked me to go to my mother's cousin's home in Canada while he was stationed with the Army in the Philippines."

They later married in Texas and then drove to Southern California, which was swamped with returning military men. Their youngest daughter was born there and they lived with a local woman until they could find a house. After a divorce, Perdue and her daughter moved to the San Francisco area, where her two older girls lived.

Following a short stint in retail, Perdue entered real estate sales, which she continued when she move to Sedona, Ariz., in the mid-1970s. While there, she also took several t'ai chi chih classes.

"I felt some electrical energy during my second class session," Perdue said. "Then I went with five friends to a seminar about energy in New Mexico. I was very bored by the end of the week, but on the last morning, a teacher had us do some t'ai chi chih movements.

"After that, one of my friends asked him to come to Sedona to teach a class. She offered him room and board and then we found class members and classroom space."

Perdue taught her first t'ai chi chih class in 1974. She continued teaching through moves to Phoenix, where she also sold real estate and, finally, to Leawood several years ago. Only her hip problem could sideline her.

"Chi is the energy in the universe that makes everything organized," Perdue said. "It's a balancing force. When you do t'ai chi chih, you're pulling the energy field into the human body with your hands and people can feel it very quickly." Perdue is considering teaching t'ai chi chih again, this time in a seated position.

"It is exceedingly gentle," she said, "and has benefits even when you're sitting down."