

Puddles and pebbles and ripples

By FRANZ DENGHAUSEN

When first I came to Rockport I joined a friend and classmate at the Boston Museum School in a small sculpture class he held in his studio on Bearskin Neck.

Chan was a member of a family of scholars, and had come from China to the United States to study Western art so that he might return to his native land and teach our culture there. For many years he studied painting, then design, and finally sculpture at the Boston Museum School. A year after I worked with him in Rockport he went to study stone carving in Italy.

He returned here for a while, and then this gentle, strong and dedicated man set out for his homeland to complete his mission. We wondered why he traveled to China by way of Europe, and we soon found out. Chan stopped in Italy to marry a remarkable Italian girl who elected to join him in a strange land for a life more strange than either of them dreamed it could be.

We soon lost contact with each other. Friends are so readily found, and half forgotten, when we are young.

The pebbles?

One day in the early 1950s a neighbor of mine, the distinguished lawyer, George Roewer, asked me to view some sculpture which was part of the estate of Mrs. Galen Perrett who had lately passed away. The sculptures were by Chan! Upon finding that I had known him, Mr. Roewer quizzed me a bit, then tossed the first pebble.

Among Mrs. Perrett's papers he had come upon an 18-year correspondence between Mr. and Mrs. Chan and Mrs. Perrett's sister, Elsa Rehmann, a distinguished architect who had long been Chan's patroness.

In the following few sentences I shall try to sketch a story that deserves a book.

My view



Franz Denghausen of Rockport is a sculptor and long-time patron of the arts on Cape Ann.

The Chans had barely established themselves in Canton, and produced a family of two sons and a daughter, when the Japanese invaded China in the late 1930s. They stayed in Canton as long as they could, then Mrs. Chan and the children fled to the haven of a convent in neutral Hong Kong. The father stuck it out in China for some time, but after the Japanese invasion came civil war and he, too, retreated to Hong Kong. He resumed his career there, but returned to the mainland to help a relative, was imprisoned by the revolutionaries, and finally rejoined his family broken in health. His work not done, Chan died in 1951.

His widow and Mrs. Perrett continued to correspond and Mr. Roewer showed me the last of these very intimate letters received by his client before she died. Mrs. Chan wrote, as only a devoted mother could, of her elder son's consuming desire to enter medical school so that he might give to others the care his father did not have — and her inability to save quite enough from her salary to send him there without depriving her other two children.

My wife suggested that we try to

help. I wrote to as many of Chan's classmates at the Museum School as I could track down, and for a very modest sum our group enabled Mrs. Chan to see her son through four years of a very fine English medical school in Hong Kong. When the younger son decided to follow the same course we were able to do it again.

The elder son did his residency in surgery in England, and the younger his internship in two hospitals in Massachusetts, where we came to know him very well. I regret that he is the only member of Chan's family I have ever met.

Their musically very talented sister — from her photographs an exquisite Eurasian — married an English college professor in Hong Kong, and they now live in England with their children. After practicing surgery for some years in Hong Kong the elder Chan moved his family and career to Canada. Hong Kong, the haven of his childhood, was no place to bring up children in this changing world. The one we came to know married a Massachusetts girl and joined his brother in Canada. Her two sons established members of the medical profession in this new world, half a world away from her native Italy, the remarkable Mrs. Chan has joined them in Canada — although she lives quite independently.

The puddle formed in Rockport many years ago.

In a recent letter Mrs. Chan told me that one of her sons had sponsored a Vietnamese family who had become successfully established on a Canadian farm.

Another pebble?

Perhaps all the ripples have not yet come to shore.

Franz H. Denghausen