For more than 90 years, Curtis students have attended school to study, practice, rehearse, and perform. But when they were not in lessons, rehearsals, a practice room, or a classroom, how did they spend their time? Where did they live? What did they do in their leisure hours?

These everyday, social aspects of student life are, almost by definition, underrepresented in Curtis’s historical record—documented informally (if at all) in student snapshots or oft-repeated anecdotes. Last summer the Curtis Archives assembled an exhibit on student life, and in the process collected archival materials from alumni and conducted oral histories focused on student life in various eras. These provide a glimpse into the daily lives of Curtis students through the decades.

Heleve van Rossum was the archivist at the Curtis Institute of Music from October 2011 through February 2015.

Adding to the Archives
By definition, archival collections contain few tangible relics of student life. The Curtis Archives seeks personal photographs, memorabilia, and recollections of alumni to supplement our records. If you can help, please contact the Archives at archives@curtis.edu.
“[Mrs. Bok] wanted to make sure that everyone was well-fed, so the upper floor of [1720 Locust St.] was a magnificent cafeteria where you could get a hot meal for 15 or 20 cents. She hired a live-in housekeeper who planned the meals and acted as a major-domo to make sure the buildings were properly maintained.”

—Diana Steiner (Violin ’57)
in *Mother Started It* (2009)

“The common room was always full of students moving around, going to classes or sitting between classes and chatting with each other. Jane Hill, the registrar, was in the room to the right of the entrance. When Mrs. Bok would arrive at the Curtis, [Jane Hill would] come out of the door and say, “Everybody get up!””

—Eleanor Sokoloff (Piano ’36)
“We had a race to see who could have the fastest time racing [through the main building]—we went down, and raced across the basement to the last exit on the other side of Curtis, and raced up to the first floor, and got back to the staircase. So we would shave our time down from two minutes to one minute and 38 seconds.”

—Arnold Steinhardt (Violin ’59)

“I, at least in retrospect, consider the Curtis social unit akin to a near-Utopian community. Curtis was the nearest to a one-world, non-prejudicial, peer-supportive society I could imagine. There were no lines drawn for race, color, religion, age, ethnic origin, financial status, geographic origin or language.”

MUSICAL ISLAND

Curtis students were well aware of the sweeping changes that took hold on American campuses in the 1960s. In the 1969–70 school year they added their voice to nationwide student protests with an outdoor performance. They also petitioned for the appointment of a student counselor and a say in the selection of chamber music, which had thrived after Rudolf Serkin succeeded Efrem Zimbalist as director in 1968. In general, however, the school remained the small island of musical study that it had been in the previous decades. Student life was still concentrated in the common room—where students leaned over the balcony to communicate with friends on the floor below, or sat on the stairs to arrange their schedules—or in the basement library.

“When I arrived at Curtis in the fall of 1969, I discovered that girls were not allowed to wear pants to school. My friends and I accepted this as part of the conservative nature of the school, but we were shocked that winter when, during the worst snowstorm of the year, a girl showed up at the door of Curtis wearing a nice tailored pantsuit, and was sent home by the lady at the front desk. That was the last year of the unspoken clothes rules. Early in the year, one soprano brazenly showed up to Wednesday Tea wearing velvet hot pants, and was not sent home or even reprimanded. Within a few months we were regularly wearing pants to school, except for Tea and lessons.”

—Lucy Chapman (Violin ’74)

“It felt important to us to join the students protests across the country [against the Vietnam War and invasion of Cambodia], and to do our share in trying to speak through music by performing Mahler’s First Symphony on Rittenhouse Square. The orchestra was made up of some Curtis students as well as the larger community of freelancers and students from other music schools in Philadelphia.”

—Judith Serkin (Cello ’73)
EVERYDAY EVOLUTION
In the 1980s and 1990s, student life evolved considerably. The accreditation of the school in 1993 made students eligible for federal student aid to supplement their Curtis scholarships. A student council was formed and an orientation week for incoming students was instituted. The orchestra traveled to the Evian Festival and toured more widely, contributing to close friendships among students.

AND TODAY...
In the past decade, student life has continued to evolve. The 2011 opening of Lenfest Hall, which provides housing for half the student body as well as full food service, has provided new gathering spaces and traditions; and today Curtis is more directly involved in student activities than ever before. And with social media, selfies, and spontaneous videos, daily documentation of student life poses less of a challenge than in decades past.

“[Evian] was a two-and-a-half-week residency in a beautiful area. The nice thing about it was the schedule gave us an opportunity to do a lot of nice things in that area of the country. ... And when you’re at Evian or Verbier and having meals together, you had an opportunity to meet people that you wouldn’t normally be with.”
—Paul Bryan (Trombone ’93)

“[In the student lounge] ping-pong was the big thing. We had ping-pong tournaments to the degree where there were charts, where they would play down to try to get a champion.”
—Jennifer Higdon (Composition ’88)