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104-yr.-old heiress in mystery

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A 104-year-old Fifth Avenue copper-mining heiress who's been living in a hospital for two decades is now the center of a criminal investigation into how her half-billion dollar fortune -- and welfare -- are being handled, say sources familiar with the probe.

The Manhattan District Attorney's Office is looking into the affairs of Huguette Clark, who hasn't been seen by building staffers at her luxury co-op overlooking Central Park since she was carried away in an ambulance more than 20 years ago.

Attorney Wallace Bock and accountant Irving Kamsler have been in charge of her financial affairs for years, and they're among the few people who have contact with her.

"She's very much alive," Bock said recently.

But neither Bock nor Kamsler returned calls about the probe, first reported by MSNBC.com.

The investigation comes a year after the Manhattan DA successfully prosecuted the sensational case surrounding Brooke Astor, the late philanthropist and heiress whose 85-year-old son was convicted of scheming with her attorney to bilk millions of dollars from her.

Clark is worth about \$500 million -- four times as much as Astor.

There's no record of a will, and relatives haven't seen her in years. When she left her home on a stretcher, Clark was frail but not physically ill, according to building staffers.

Since then, nobody has lived in her meticulously maintained 42 rooms at 907 Fifth Ave., or her \$24 million Connecticut castle, surrounded by 52 acres of land -- properties financed by a fortune inherited from a 19th century Montana copper-mining king who built railroads across America, founding Las Vegas along the way.

Clark also owns a mansion in Santa Barbara, Calif., on a 23-acre bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The stunning properties -- and her name in the New York Social Register -- are all that's left of her privileged existence.

After leaving the Fifth Avenue apartment, Clark took up residence in Doctors' Hospital, across from Gracie Mansion on the Upper East Side. When the hospital was razed in 2004, she wound up in an ordinary hospital room elsewhere in the city.

Clark was born in 1906 Paris to then 67-year-old US Sen. William A. Clark of Montana, and a 28-year-old Michigan woman, Anna Eugenia La Chapelle.

Years of mining the Montana earth for copper made Clark the second-richest man in America, after the Rockefellers. To prove it, he built an ostentatious mansion on Fifth Avenue and gained power as a one-term US senator.

His daughter attended Miss Spence's School for Girls in Manhattan, now The Spence School, studying modern dance while getting savvy about politics and art.

In the Roaring '20, the Clarks' Fifth Avenue home was the scene of wild parties, and Huguette hung out with rich young men who drove fast cars and flew planes.

At 22, she married a poor bank clerk, but they parted ways after only nine months. Huguette Clark cited desertion by her husband. He claimed she failed to consummate the marriage, according to "The Clarks: An American Phenomenon."

After her father died in 1925, she and her mother left the mansion and moved to 907 Fifth Ave.

When her mother died in 1963, Huguette was transformed from a rather private socialite in her 50s to a social specter -- an eccentric whom building staff members say they never saw.

Even distant relatives attempting to visit were discouraged from entering; she told several of them to stand on the sidewalk and she would wave to them, staffers remember.

In the end, her vast fortune allowed the heiress to lead an ever more solitary life.

She's said to have once told friends that extreme wealth is a "menace to happiness."

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