

FOUR DECADES OF AKRON CHAPTER HARMONY

From the third floor mezzanine of the flourishing Mayflower Hotel the happy chords of barbershop harmony officially arrived in Akron, Ohio on July 12, 1945 with the chartering of the Akron Chapter of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America. Twelve men, with M. A. "Matt" Matthews handling the paperwork, were happy to learn their new name, it's a hobby for men who like to sing and harmonize in four parts. It has been enjoyed by thousands over the past forty years in the Akron area by performers and listeners. Social and financial status play no part in enlisting "congenial men of good character who love harmony in music or have a desire to harmonize"(quoted from the Society's Code of Ethics).

No actual figures are available but an educated guess puts the numbers who have been members over the past forty years in the Akron Chapter close to five hundred.

At least two hundred quartets have been formed in the Akron Chapter. Fifty—four of these have registered with the International one or more years. The Interludes quartet registered in 1969 are still performing. The Four Chordials, an earlier quartet, can account for twelve years of active quartetting.

Two Quartets brought fame to the Akron Chapter. On Jan 1, 1955, the Parakeets formed at a New Year's party. Their meteoric rise in competition carried them to International competition the following year. Shortly thereafter, tenor Forest Bostic was transferred to Boston and Bob Evans entered the quartet. Parts were shifted but their popularity kept them in shows everywhere. This is the only Akron Chapter quartet to ever participate in making a record for general distribution. As with all things, the bass, Dick O'Leary, was relocated to Florida by his company, and the name "Parakeets" joined Akron Chapter history. Two members of that disbanded quartet formed the "Akro—Lads" and they were perennial show favorites for the next ten years in JAD and other Districts.

The second championship quartet was formed in August, 1969 at a Corn Roast put on by the Elyria Chapter. With the name "Akromatics" they rapidly entered the winning circle as JAD District Champions and in the top three at the JAD International Preliminaries to be eligible for International Competition. In 1972, the tenor of the quartet, Thom Hine, was transferred to Michigan. The quartet acquired another tenor and continued to sing as the Akromatics, filled many engagements for another year or so and then disbanded.

The Akron Chapter formed a chorus to give everybody a chance to sing. In 1948 the Akron Chorus and quartets, with the help of the Massillon Chapter (and chorus), put on the first Barber Shop "Parade of Quartets". Edmund Duplaga was the show chairman. Goodyear Theater was the place and 545 tickets were sold. Each year the number of fans increased. For a short time the show was a coordinated affair with an opening at the Goodyear Theater and then moving across the street to the Union Hall for another waiting audience to repeat the performance. The next move was to the Akron Civic Theater for great shows on Saturday night. In 1971 the Akron Derbytown Chorus appeared on stage for Friday and Saturday night performances. For two more years the Akron Civic Theater rang with thrilling barbershop harmony. In 1973 the Akron Chapter moved to E. J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall. Since that time all performances have been there. The 39th Annual Parade of Quartets will be held the last weekend of February. 1986.

The Akron Chapter Chorus has won first place in the Eastern Divisional competition three times, in 1964 and 1965 under the direction of Johnny Johnston. In 1971 the chorus won the coveted spot with Thom Hine, the tenor of the Akromatics mentioned above.

A meeting hall for the Akron Chapter presented some problems as the requirements for rehearsal room increased. From the Mayflower Hotel, the Chapter moved to the YWCA for a time. Then the Chapter enjoyed the hospitality of Jack Deluca's Bismarck Cafe on North Hill. For more room it was back to the Mayflower. At Broadway and High Streets with the windows open in summer, people would pause to listen to singing from the Knights of Pythias Hall on the second floor. A pleasant few years were spent at Columbus Hall across from St. Thomas Hospital. Our last meeting there was just a few days before the wrecker's ball would whack it away. The German—American Club looked like an oasis in disguise and some great things happened there. The food was fantastic for the afterglows after the annual shows. But danger lurked on the outside and it was necessary to move to the outskirts of town to the Eagles 555. On leaving the Eagles 555 due to some misfortunes there also, a move to the Firestone YMCA building was made. The whole place was made of tile and sounded and resounded like you were singing in a bathroom, but it was fun. Good fortune in searching brought the Chapter the opportunity to occupy the Carriage House at Stan Hywet Hall. This was home to the Akron Chapter for ten years, the longest period since it was founded. The necessity to seek more modest accommodations was assigned to the House Search Comm. When the opportunity to have weekly meetings at the Fairlawn Community Center was offered, it was acted upon quickly. Large halls with high ceilings, good acoustics, kitchen facilities, and nearly brand new are hard to come by. Fairlawn has been annexed by Akron so is eligible as a meeting place. On two brief occasions the Akron Chapter met in Cuyahoga Falls. In 1962 some months of rehearsals were on the second floor of the V. F. W. Bob Applemen Post. With a vague possibility of relocating, the basement level of the Chas. Faust American Legion Post on Front St. was used for rehearsals and meetings. The trial was unsuccessful.

In the administration of the Akron Chapter, a board of directors is voted into office. A president, two vice—presidents, a secretary and treasurer constitute the officers. A District delegate, the bulletin editor, the public relations person, and generally six board members at large complete the panel. William Friedman, the Akron Chapter charter year president in 1945 lives in California but still retains his membership and corresponds with some of the members. Thirty—six men have been president. Only one, Wm. Weddington, served three consecutive terms. Four others have served two terms — not always consecutively.

In 1950 a very well known member passed away. It was the desire of his two sisters to perpetuate his memory in his favorite hobby. Thus, the Larry Neal Memorial Award was established for the Akron Chapter. This was called the Barber—shopper of the Year Award. The Akron Chapter was the first to use this type award and it is now virtually in use by every Chapter and District registered with the International Society. The first award was made to Chorus Director Leonard Konich for his dedication, knowledge and patience. Most barbershoppers do not read music and various methods are used to teach the parts. In the 33 years since that time one person was awarded the BOTY award three times. His name is Edgar Crosley and he has been consistently active in administration and show work since he joined the Akron Chapter. In fact, he had not been a member for one year before he was elected president. For over ten years he has been the Chapter Bulletin Editor. Eight others have been honored with two BOTY plaques.

The Barbershopper of the Year Award is also given on the JAD District level. The Johnny Appleseed District is all of Ohio, western Pennsylvania, and the west corner of West Virginia. Two members of the Akron Chapter have been honored at the District Level. The first to receive it was Edmund Duplaga in 1960. The second was John Whitaker, Jr. in 1982.

The JAD has a Hall of Fame and only three members of the Akron Chapter have been recipients of this prestigious award. The first to be so honored was Edmund Duplaga. He had held virtually every Chapter office, was president of the JAD District, served as an International Board Member of the International Society. Interspersed with all this are other important accomplishments too numerous to mention in this brief review. Suffice it to say, he is extremely active on the International Society level in its affairs. The second to receive this honor was Edgar

Crosley. He has contributed to the refinement and improvement of barbershop singing with sophisticated and systematic use of sound equipment in addition to his District level involvement in administration. John Whitaker, Jr. the third to receive the JAD Gold Medal has been, and still is, involved in every level of administration in the JAD District. His contributions to improving communications in District—Chapter relations affirm his dedication to the hobby and craft of Barbershop Harmony.

It is pure folly to assume forty years of history of such a vital, energetic, extrovertive hobby of a group of men who have organized for the purpose of entertaining and educating others in the unique musical style of barbershop harmony can be revealed in a few pages of brief notations. We pause with gratitude to thank all who joined in years past in the thousands of hours of practice, rehearsals, and meetings. We are grateful to those who have been leaders and teachers for those who came to learn. It is a personal, rewarding experience which is culminated in singing for others the songs they, too, love and enjoy.

by Art Ruggles, July, 1985