

HISTORY OF BARBERSHOP

compiled by David Wright

Lesson 3: DECLINE

Glenn Howard. Glenn was born May 29, 1902, in Decatur, and became avidly interested in harmony early at age seventeen when a group of harmonizers called on him to fill in the bass to "Bright Was the Night". A quartet man all his life, Glenn lived his later years in Cisco, Illinois, near Decatur. He consented to be interviewed by the author at his home in February of 1986, and on that day, he opened the doors of his memory. As we conversed, his smiling wife Kate was sitting in the next room writing, in view, and from time to time she would offer her recollections as well. The 85 year old Glenn Howard vividly recalled a lifetime devoted to quartet harmony. For many years Glenn was the only man alive who had attended every convention of our Society. But those events represented only the later memories for Glenn. He had been a quartet man for nearly twenty years before the Society was formed.

An example of a non-professional quartet of the era was the one he formed in 1919 at age seventeen. It was called the Oriole Quartette; Glenn initially sang bass, later lead. This quartet continued through the decade of the 1920's — a long life for a nonprofessional quartet. These avid songsters, especially Glenn and baritone Floyd Meier, attended every event in the vicinity at which a professional quartet appeared. Glenn gave assurance that minstrel shows were still in existence into the 1930's, and that they nearly always had a quartet. He recalled the interlocutor joking with the end men, and the quartet men being a part of the chorus when they weren't singing as a quartet. Vaudeville shows, by then accompanied by movies, would usually feature a quartet, and these young men would sit through two or three showings to hear the quartet repeat their performance. When the quartet sang, Glen and Floyd would try to memorize the lyrics and the harmony (the 1920's analogue of "lifting it off the recording"). Glen specifically mentioned the Avon Comedy Four and the Stratford Comedy Four as his favorite vaudeville quartets. Much of the Oriole Quartet's material was learned from listening to the quartets of the vaudeville and minstrel shows. These impressionable young men were also highly influenced by the studio quartets, whom they heard on 78 r.p.m. records and on the radio. These quartets were held in high esteem, and Glenn told me that the Peerless quartet was his favorite, that they had an incredible sound — like an organ. We should recognize that Glenn and his fellow harmonizers were carrying on a national tradition that was already beginning to die out, partially because popular music was becoming less conducive to harmonization. Nevertheless, Glenn stated that his quartet continued to sing the popular songs of the day, and when a new Irving Berlin song would be released, they would work out an arrangement (always by ear). According to Glenn, they got great pleasure out of developing their own harmonizations of the songs they learned.

The Oriole Quartet was but one of the quartets active in the Decatur area in the 1920's. Glenn produced a list of about eight or so quartets that were active at the time. These groups sang at parties, dinners, meetings — just like today's quartets — and every year the Oriole Quartette sang at the Illinois state fair. Glenn showed a photograph, taken at the 1924 fair, of his quartet and another quartet called the Melody Four. The quartet men are all holding megaphones.

Glenn Howard died in 1993.

"Straight", "close," and "barbershop". Glenn Howard considered the harmony sung by the studio quartets to be mostly "straight" harmony, as opposed to "close" harmony. The distinction seems to be that "close" harmony makes greater attempt to avoid the major triad (root doubled on the octave), replacing it where possible with a dominant seventh chord. It is of interest that before the formation of SPEBSQSA in 1938, Glen's quartet did not call itself a "barbershop" quartet. The author specifically asked Glenn about this, and he seemed a little puzzled at the line of questioning. He responded by saying that his quartet was not sponsored by a barbershop. Asked if he would have considered it strange at the time if someone had referred to them as a barbershop quartet, he answered yes, he would have thought it strange. Asked how he would have described the type of music they sang, he used the term "close harmony." This indicates that the adjective "barbershop" was by no means universal to quartet men — and indicates that the vaudeville and minstrel quartets were not always, and perhaps not even typically, billed as "barbershop quartets". (We know that the studio quartets such as the Peerless and American Quartets were not advertised or labeled as barbershop quartets.)

Harmony men. It is hard for us to appreciate how avidly these early lovers of harmony pursued their craft. They eagerly latched on to any new moves they hadn't heard before, like a new "swipe" (a word, incredibly, that Glenn Howard hadn't

heard before the formation of the Society) or a different voicing. Glenn had the ear to pick up, memorize, and teach his quartet any and all new tricks of the trade. This art of hearing, remembering, and teaching harmony was a coveted ability, and those who possessed it were called "harmony men." It seems to have been a sort of folk art in this age. Glenn told of a harmony man he met sometime in the 1920's who traveled with a carnival. This man knew more harmony than anyone Glenn had ever met. Years later (presumably in 1942), while in Grand Rapids attending a society convention, Glenn encountered that same harmony man at a carnival. It was necessary for a good quartet to have such a person, for their arrangements were not written down, and learning was by ear.

John Hanson and Jim Jordan (Fibber McGee). In Peoria, Illinois, two vaudeville men, who would later become influential in quite different ways, were singing together in a vaudeville quartet. One was bass John Hanson, who promoted, directed, and sang in vaudeville and minstrel shows through the 20's and 30's. He married his piano accompanist and their daughter Betty, recalls being brought on stage to sing "Lulu's Back In Town" as an encore to a bass solo sung by her father. John later became one of the Society's great, but little recognized pioneers. His daughter, Betty Hanson Oliver, was to become a Sweet Adeline Queen of Harmony in 1952 with the Pitch Pipers, and a barbershop arranger and chorus director. The other man's name was Jim Jordan, who sang baritone. Jim was a bit irresponsible, and would aggravate the quartet by his tardiness, showing up for a performance just as the curtain opened. An article in the Peoria Star Journal says, "he used to sing barbershop music on summer nights in front of Duffner's soda fountain...and at Tomkins Saloon and," Jordan recalled, "'in any saloon that would let us stay.'" Jim Jordan went from vaudeville into radio and the movies, where he became the famous Fibber McGee.

"Coney Island Baby" is written. In 1924 one of barbershop's standard songs came into existence. A professional musician and barbershopper (lead and arranger for the Tulsa Police Quartet) named Les Applegate wrote "Coney Island Baby" to be performed in Muncie, Indiana by a quartet in a condensed touring production of "No, No, Nanette". In the scene a group of performers bid a mock farewell to Nanette on the beach in Atlantic City, and Applegate thought the farewell should be sung rather than spoken. The song was not copyrighted, and incorporated an obscure song called "We All Fall" as a medley. There is some evidence to suggest that it existed previously as a traditional quartet song. Remarkably, the amalgamation became popularly associated with barbershop quartets, but was not written down.

Geoffrey O'Hara writes "The Old Songs." Geoffrey O'Hara (1882-1967) was a well-known singer, lecturer, musicologist, teacher, and songwriter. Born in Canada, he came to the United States in 1904 as a minstrel singer, and subsequently performed in and around New York City in vaudeville, light opera, and the Chautauqua. He also became a recording artist beginning in 1905, singing in quartets and as a soloist for Edison and Victor. He became a composer of songs of a formal nature, such as "Give A Man A Horse He Can Ride", 1917, and popular songs such as "K-k-k-Katy", 1918.

In another vein, he composed in 1921 a medley of songs, arranged for quartet called "A Little Close Harmony." (Note the use of the word "close" instead of "barbershop.") Two things about this composition have historical significance for barbershoppers: (1) It's introduction is "The Old Songs," our current theme song; and (2) On the front page is a footnote which uses the word "swipe" to refer to a chord change achieved when quartet singers each move to a different note while sustaining the same syllable. It is the first known use of this word in this context. O'Hara was a member of SPEBSQSA's Manhattan Chapter in its early days.

Sigmund Spaeth writes Barber Shop Ballads. Another person who was later to be influential in the Society was Sigmund Spaeth (1885-1965), who was a nationally known musician, columnist, and historian. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton, and wrote some twenty-three books on the history of popular music in America. He was nicknamed "the tune detective." Spaeth was very interested in barbershop harmony, and wrote several books on the subject. Spaeth used the term "barber shop" in his writings. In 1925 he wrote a book called "Barber Shop Ballads" which explains and demonstrates how close harmony should be sung, and provides four part arrangements of many old songs. The book is written as a learner's manual for quartets. Here Spaeth formalizes the use of the terms "tenor," "lead," "baritone," and "bass" as replacements for "first tenor," "second tenor," "first bass," and "second bass." Spaeth also makes mention of barber shop quartet contests (p.89), confirming their existence at this early date.

Spaeth later would serve on the Society's National Board of Directors from 1939 to 1941, was an officer in the Manhattan chapter in its early days, and wrote a regular column, "The Old Songsters," in the Harmonizer from 1945 to 1955.

The Wheaties Quartet. The world's first singing radio commercial aired on Christmas Eve, 1926 for Wheaties cereal. The four male singers, eventually known as the Wheaties Quartet, sang the jingle, which was roughly to the tune of "She's A

Jazz Baby". In the 1930's the jingle was used on the Jack Armstrong program. Jack Armstrong was the "All-American Boy," an airplane-flying, horseback-riding, spy-catching, football- and baseball-playing wonder. The Wheaties Quartet, comprised of an undertaker, a bailiff, a printer, and a businessman, performed the song for the next six years, at \$6 per singer per week. The commercials were a resounding success.

Music of the 1920's. By the early 1920's, the influence on ragtime on popular music had reached a culmination, and its quality reached a peak. Tunes now had somewhat more sophisticated rhythms, in contrast to the ballads of the turn of the century, which now seemed maudlin. Their melodies still (generally) implied conventional harmonies conducive to ear singing, but they utilized much greater variety. The liveliness of these songs reflected the craziness of the times in which they were written. No single song captures the spirit of this age and its music any better than "The Charleston", published in 1923, but written a few years earlier by one of America's great (but little recognized) ragtimers, James P. Johnson. It is one of the happiest pieces of music ever written.

This decade gave us the best of the great uptunes: "Ma, He's Makin Eyes At Me" (1921), "Somebody Stole My Gal" (1922), "Toot Toot Tootsie, Goodbye" (1922), "California, Here I Come" (1924), "Five Foot Two, Eyes Of Blue" (1925) — a textbook example of the "circle of fifths", "If You Knew Susie — Like I Know Susie" (1925), "Sweet Georgia Brown" (1925), "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" (1925) "Baby Face" (1926). It gave us rich ballads with interesting harmonic turns: "My Mammy" (1920), "That Old Gang Of Mine" (1923) "My Buddy" (1922), "Sonny Boy" (1928), "Wedding Bells Are Breaking Up That Old Gang Of Mine" (1929). Many of these songs were popularized by the famous Al Jolson, who had come up through vaudeville. Jolson's act played on the nostalgia of minstrelsy. One of his most memorable renditions was of the 1920 song "My Mammy", which interpolates Stephen Fosters "Old Black Joe."

Change in rhythms and harmonies. As the 20's progressed, some of the songs that appeared began to introduce harmonies that make ear harmonization difficult to impossible. These songs were built more around the minor seventh chord, the major sixth chord, and the major seventh chord than the dominant seventh characteristic of the previous style, and so all-important to the ear singer. One of the first such examples is the song "After You've Gone," from 1918, which features the major seventh chord. Ragtime gave way to jazz, and eventually to the big band sound.

George Gershwin (1898-1937), an American genius whose popular songwriting career was launched in 1919 with the classic "Swanee," was one of the composers whose music helped to turn the tide toward the new, much more sophisticated harmonies, as well as rhythms more associated with the jazz and "swing" era of the 30's and 40's. Gershwin bold composition "Rhapsody In Blue" (1924) elevated him to a position of greatness as a composer and profoundly influenced the development of jazz harmony and rhythm. Popular songs that exemplify his techniques are: "Someone To Watch Over Me" (1926), in which diminished and minor seventh chords predominate, "Fascinating Rhythm" (1924), which is an exhibition of jazz rhythmic devices, "It Aint Necessarily So" (1935), which makes extensive use of the quarter note triplet, a jazz device which uncharacteristic of the previous generation's music.

Other songwriters had to adapt to the new style; some couldn't, and others, notably the veteran Irving Berlin, did so quite successfully.

The tempo of life was faster, what with radios automobiles, and movies. Simultaneous with these new harmonies and rhythms came the advent of fancy crooning. The nation was turning to this more sophisticated music, epitomized by the smooth singing style of vocalists like Bing Crosby and groups like the Mills Brothers.

Harmony groups of the 1930's. The Mills Brothers' father, John, had been a quartet man. In the early part of their career the Mills Brothers were a quartet, with John singing bass. In these recordings, the group's quartet roots are quite apparent. Other smooth singing groups were formed, which besides singing their own songs, served as studio back up groups. Often the personnel of these groups consisted of former quartet men. This group, the Revelers, was a popular group that was the prototype for the German quartet The Comedian Harmonists. Yet another seminal group was The Boswell Sisters, a trio who style surely influences later female harmony groups such as the Andrews Sisters.

The Comedian Harmonists. The Comedian Harmonists, patterned after the Revelers, were an internationally famous, all-male German close harmony ensemble that performed between 1928 and 1934 as one of the most successful musical groups in Europe before World War II. The group was a vocal quintet with piano consisting of Harry Frommermann (tenor buffo), Ari Leschnikoff (first tenor), Erich Collin (second tenor), Roman Cycowski (baritone), Robert Biberti (bass), and Erwin Bootz (pianist). The hallmark of the Comedian Harmonists was its members' ability to blend their voices together so that the individual singers could appear and disappear back into the vocal texture. Its repertoire was wide, ranging from the

folk and classical songs arranged by Frommermann to appealing and witty popular songs of the day. The vast majority of their songs were performed in their native language. Occasionally, however, they would tackle an English-language song, singing phonetically. The group enjoyed remarkable success that continued into the early 1930s, but they eventually ran into trouble with the Nazi regime: three of the group members - Frommermann, Collin, and Cycowski - were either Jewish or of Jewish descent, and Bootz had married a Jewish woman. The Nazis progressively made the group's professional life more difficult, initially banning pieces by Jewish composers, and finally prohibiting them from performing in public. The group's last concert was in Hannover on March 25, 1934.

Advent of the microphone; demise of studio quartets. By 1926, the microphone was being used for recording. This gave greatly improved quality and helped effect the change in singing style, for it enabled the smooth, crooning voices to be recorded with good fidelity. By comparison to this music, male quartets sounded rough cut and old-timey. Old style recording artists like Henry Burr and Billy Murray had bright, edgy voices necessary for recording with the horn, but as new technology like the microphone brought in better fidelity, their recorded voices sounded harsh and unpleasant. They became passé. The very last song recorded by the American Quartet was "Alabama Bound", recorded in 1925 with a plethora of "special effects" (train whistle, etc.) created in the studio. Henry Burr's Peerless quartet lasted another three years, folding in 1928.

Demise of spontaneous singing. Up until this time America had been a nation of musical participants. Live music flourished. Most parlors or living rooms had a piano, which mother could play, and most parents encouraged spontaneous family music making. Many barbershops had a guitar or mandolin. We gradually became a nation of musical spectators, rather than participants. Vaudeville was fatally diminished by its own motion pictures that began to have sound in 1929. The live entertainment it furnished was no match for the colorful production that was displayed on the screen. As vaudeville was dying it turned to burlesque in an unsuccessful last ditch effort to sustain itself. (The movie "Gypsy" about the famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee is set in the context of vaudeville's last gasp for survival.) In accordance with the national trend, live music making at the amateur level dwindled, and, of course, so did the quartets, so that by 1938 the thousands of male quartets had been reduced to a few hundred, with some struggling professional groups remaining as vaudeville and radio quartets.

Capitol City Four. But in the Decatur, Illinois area, the interest of Glenn Howard and others remained strong, despite the trend. Around 1930, Glenn Howard's Oriole Quartette broke up, and Glenn, still avidly interested in quartet singing despite the national trend, formed the Capitol City Four, from Springfield, Illinois. Glenn sang baritone. This quartet sang for nine years before the Society formed, and then became a Society quartet, finishing second in the first National Contest. One evening in 1930 the quartet was singing at a fish fry in Havana, Illinois, when one of the listeners became so excited with their music that he drove 25 miles to Canton, Illinois, and returned with Dr. Mark Nelson, a quartet enthusiast. "Doc" Nelson would become one of the Capitol City Four's greatest supporters, and an early influence in the fledgling barbershop society.

Maple City Four. It should be pointed out that although the professional quartet waned in the 30's, it didn't disappear completely. A few quartets continued to sing, and were probably viewed by the public largely as relics from the not too distant past, like we view the Beatles today. One such quartet was the Maple City Four, from La Porte, Indiana, who sang on the Chicago radio station WLS. This quartet also appeared as singing cowboys in some Gene Autry and Roy Rodgers movies. Glenn Howard got to know these professionals, and several times they invited the Capitol City Four to Chicago to make guest appearances on the air. They clearly recognized Glenn's skill as a quartet man, for in the late 30's they would ask him to fill in when one of their members was unable to sing.

Glenn Howard meets Henry Burr. It was on one such trip to Chicago that Glenn had an experience he has not forgotten to this day. He met Henry Burr, former lead of Glenn's idol quartet, the Peerless. Burr, near the end of his career, was a guest on the same radio show doing solo work. Between performances, Glenn approached him in the lobby of the hotel across the street from the studio, and the two men conversed for a half an hour. Burr impressed Glenn as being "a fine gentleman".

New York City's Park Contests. In 1935 the city of New York, under Park Commissioner Robert Moses began sponsoring barbershop quartet contests. These were held in Central Park and at Coney Island and frequently featured other entertainers, like W. C. Handy. Judges were local officials, often including Robert Moses and the Mayor. This tradition continued until the sixties. Dr Matt Warpick of New York City showed a program from the last such contest. It was held on

June 8, 1966. The program names Mayor John Lindsay, but Dr. Warpick said that Lindsay was not there. The second annual Society contest, held in Central Park in 1940, was seen as a continuation of this tradition.

Illinois Harmony Club. Jack Baird reports that in about 1934 John Hanson put on a minstrel show and asked his singing buddies from the towns near Peoria to join in. After that show they decided to continue singing together and formed a club, which, he reports, met in various locations, and became a chapter of 54 members when the Society was formed.

Additionally, Glenn Howard reported sending out invitations to a meeting in Springfield, at which was organized the "Illinois Harmony Club," of which Glenn served as first president, and Doc Nelson was, of course, an active member. I do not know whether this organization was, or became, the same as the one mentioned above, but the indication is that interest in quartet singing in Illinois was on the upswing in the 1930's. Bear in mind that, according to Glenn, these harmonizers didn't call themselves "barbershoppers." Meetings were held monthly in Canton, Decatur, Peoria, and Springfield. At one time they met in a brewery, which offered them a free place to meet, as well as free drinks. (Glenn assured me there were no excesses.) The meetings consisted of several quartets singing, woodshedding, and mass singing. An effort was made to involve everyone in these activities. Guests who were known to be good singers and capable of holding their part were sure to be involved in some quartetting so they would experience the pleasure of ringing a chord and got "hooked." Sounds like today.

At the latter club's second annual meeting, at which Roy Fox, lead of the Capitol City Four, was elected President, a busload of men from Chicago attended, and three of them, Cy Perkins, Art Bielan, and Joe Murrin first met Pete Buckley. These four men started a quartet called the Misfits, and became our seventh International Champions in 1945. This thriving community of harmony would later produce four of our early quartet champions. Also present at this meeting: a man named Maurice ("Molly") Reagan, from Canton, Illinois.

New York City Harmony Club. It is not known how many harmony organizations existed around the country prior to 1938, but it is likely that there were many. Hank Wurthman, a barbershopper from St. Louis, reported that his father, who had previously sung in a minstrel quartet in South Carolina, was a member of such a club in New York City, and that he and young Hank sang together in an informal quartet. (Later, Hank attended the second International Convention in New York, and is one of the few men alive today who can give us first hand information about that grand event.) The late Wilbur Sparks, former Society Historian, possessed two letters written by a 92 year old barbershopper Abe Brownstein (now deceased) with some details of the pre-Society activity in New York City. It was called "club harmony," a term that carried over in New York City even into early Society days. Abe recalls that it was organized in 1933 as a social club and that only later, in the late '30's, did it become a singing club that featured quartet singing. Abe seems to recall that in the late thirties or early forties this organization was chartered as a chapter in the Society and was called New York City Chapter #1.

Concluding remarks. In these days it seems that interest in reviving the American tradition of harmonizing that was brewing within the souls of men in 1938. Nobody knew it, but around the country a movement was growing in various places concurrently and independently. These were troubled times for America. The nation was still in the midst of the Great Depression. War was brewing in Europe. It's hard to say exactly why at this time there was such a longing for something as square as old-fashioned harmonizing. Perhaps it provided an escape from the depressing news of the day. Perhaps people missed what used to be a part of their lives, a form of entertainment in which they could participate, and not just listen and watch. And just maybe the new slick sounding music of the entertainment industry was already beginning to sound clichéd and boring. Whatever the reason, the time was right for a dramatic sequence of events that would bring together the Illinoisans and the New Yorkers, and men from all around this nation who loved quartet harmony. The time was right for an explosion, and in 1938 something happened that lit the fuse. It happened in, of all places, Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the next lesson, we will recount that revival.