

# HISTORY OF BARBERSHOP

compiled by David Wright

## Lesson 5: EARLY SOCIETY YEARS

**1942 Convention, Grand Rapids.** Sixty quartets competed in four preliminaries, with fifteen finalists emerging. Champs that year stole the monopoly away from Oklahoma. They were the Elastic Four, of Chicago, first of four great 40's quartets from Chicago. Dean Snyder recalled that this quartet was the first Society quartet to wear real fancy uniforms, with top hats and cutaway coats. The Elastic Four became the busiest Society quartet to that point, the first championship quartet to sing the "circuit" of chapter shows now expected of an International Champion. They were the pride of the thriving Chicago barbershop community, and idols to young men, including a youngster named Buzz Haeger. Bass singer Frank Thorne became one of the Society's most prolific early arrangers. He had known Molly Reagan in college at the University of Illinois. Lead Roy Frisby is living and attends most conventions.

Category Judging was formally used, with Staab's proposed percentages, for the first time (but all judges judged all categories). Also, and plans were made for the first bona fide mid-winter convention, which was held in Peoria, Illinois in 1943. Hal Staab became our fourth President.

**Tradition of Champs not competing.** In those days, past champions were not barred from competing by any Society rule. In fact, the Bartlesville Barflies (later called the Phillips 66 Barflies) had competed in every contest since their victory in 1939 and again competed in 1942. There was a rumor that the Flat Foot Four had been barred from the St. Louis contest. President Carroll Adams had urged the reigning champion Chord Busters to compete again, in Grand Rapids. The Chord Busters declined this invitation, but said they would come to the convention to be recognized and to "sing up a storm" in the lobbies. The Elastic Four opted to follow this example also, and the tradition remains today that a Championship Quartet is never dethroned. Suggestions to revoke this rule have met with stiff opposition from the Association of International Champions and others. It is likely here to stay.

**Sigmund Spaeth's folios.** Sigmund Spaeth collected arrangements from Embury, Reagan, and Thorne, and others, made a few of his own, and edited folios of barbershop songs. The first was called "Barber Shop Harmony," a collection that included "Bright Was The Night," "Dinah," "Aura Lee," and "The Lost Chord." These were not official Society publications, but were put together by Spaeth with the Society's blessings. Another collection, called "More Barbershop Harmony," appeared in 1945, which included some original songs. Spaeth also wrote a regular column in the Harmonizer about old songs and their composers, called "The Old Songsters."

**First judging form.** Hal Staab's proposed category weightings were in effect at the 1943 Chicago convention, and for the first time the judges used an official form. Also, they sat two seats apart, in the balcony of the theater.

**1943 Convention, Chicago.** With the war at its height and rationing in effect, there was actually some question as to whether this convention could take place. It was finally permitted by Washington, with some restrictions on travel. As a result, nearly all the registrants were from Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. This was the first of three conventions to be held in the "Windy City" over the years (subsequent ones: 1959, 1966). Quartet winners were the hometown Four Harmonizers of Chicago, second of the four great forties quartets from that city. The Four Harmonizers had formed before the formation of the Society.

Huck Sinclair, baritone of the Four Harmonizers, lived into the 1990's. He resided in Indianapolis and was quite active in the Indianapolis chorus. Huck began quartetting before the Society in Topeka, Kansas. There, on a street corner, he picked up the song "After Dark" from an itinerant quartet. Huck was in attendance when O. C. Cash and the Tulsans installed the Kansas City Chapter in 1939.

**First office.** In late 1943, the Society had its first official "office" — one room, in Detroit, rented for \$25 a month.

***"International" Society.*** In 1944 we became an international organization, with the chartering of Canada's first chapter. It was in Windsor, Ontario, right across the water from Detroit.

***Judges judge only one category; new weightings.*** The weightings of 1943 were short lived. At the '44 contest a new system was used, which is the forerunner of the modern system. First of all, each judge scored only one category. There were eight judges, two per category. Each of the categories Harmony Accuracy, Voice Expression, and Song and Voice Arrangement were allotted 300 points per judge, and Stage Presence was allotted 100 points per judge. This reflected a relative weighting of 10% for Stage Presence and 30% each for the other three categories. (The Voice Expression category included blend, attacks and releases, "shading," time, rhythm, and enunciation.) These are the same weightings which had been used two years earlier at a Michigan state contest in Grand Rapids by Thorne, Embury, Reagan, and Cy Perkins. At that contest, Carroll Adams had issued the rule: *no quartet may sing over six minutes*. An interesting twist is reported by Joe Wodicka of St. Louis, who served on the panel in Detroit. Here there were no time limits, and Reagan "took out his slide rule and all scores were mathematically adjusted to the six minute level." (It is not clear what this means.) Wodicka says one quartet sang well for only a minute and a half, and the Harmony Halls, who won, sang for six minutes.

***1944 Convention, Detroit.*** The ever-popular Gipps-Amberline Four, with John Hanson singing bass, literally stopped the show with their rendition of "Shine." Glenn Howard remembers this vividly and speaks of this quartet as one of the greatest ever. On this occasion the audience demanded that the quartet come back out and take an extra bow. This has not happened since. Quartet winners, however, were the Harmony Halls (formerly the Hall Brothers), of Grand Rapids, Michigan. One notes their soft singing, smoother than that of earlier quartets.

Other events of the convention: The young superstar Phil Embury was elected president, and the Society stuck its financial neck out by hiring its first full time employee — an administrative secretary. Carroll Adams took the job.

***Districts begin to develop; preliminary contests.*** Slowly, several states, following the lead of Michigan, were developing state organizations and regional qualifying contests. This would eventually lead to the formation of districts. By 1948 there were thirteen districts. 1945 was the first year in which preliminary contests, then called regionals, were held. There were four around the country, all judged by the same panel. The twelve highest scoring quartets, irrespective of which regional they had entered, then advanced to the finals.

***Time limits established.*** For 1945 contests, there was a new rule made which would not be altered until 1986. It stated "a quartet shall not sing less than four minutes nor more than six minutes." Penalties for time discretions were given by a table at the time; later it was changed to two points per second per judge (over or under). Time limits existed in Society contests until the judging reforms of 1993, at which time they were abolished. Time limits are still in place for Sweet Adelines contests.

***1945 Convention, Detroit.*** This is the first and only time the convention was held in the same city a second consecutive year. And in the contest Chicago did it again! Quartet Champs were the Misfits of Chicago. Cy Perkins sang baritone. Recall that the Misfits were spawned by the Illinois Harmony Club — before the formation of SPEBSQSA.

A printed 4 x 8 inch pamphlet was distributed explaining the contest rules.

***Sweet Adelines is formed.*** Interest in barbershop harmony spread among women in this era. Many wives and daughters of Society members learned the craft and yearned for an organization to promote their singing. In 1945 Bill and Edna Mae Anderson had returned to Tulsa from the Detroit convention, and Edna Mae, excited about the prospect of a women's organization, contacted other barbershoppers wives, and also O. C. Cash. Everyone was enthusiastic, and Cash was supportive, although he joked "It is a shame this thing had to come up just when we were getting along so peacefully." A meeting was set up at her home in Tulsa on Friday, July 13th, and there it was decided to have a kick-off meeting on July 23 at the Hotel Tulsa, where the second meeting of the Society had taken place back in 1938. Over 150 women attended, and 41 became charter members of what was seen as the SPEBSQSA's auxiliary, referred to (fondly but chauvinistically) by Cash as the "SPEBSQSA Corseteers" and the "Bustle Auxiliary." On August 5th, 1945, the first meeting of the Sweet Adelines took place.

As with the beginning of SPEBSQSA, the press poked fun at the founding of Sweet Adelines. A reporter from the Daily Oklahoman wrote "Let 'em liberate their personalities by whipping up hot biscuits and chicken." Outraged Sweet Adelines responded by deluging him with biscuits.

The first Sweet Adelines Convention was held two years later in 1947, which crowned the Decaturettes, from Decatur Illinois, as the first Queens of Harmony. Sweet Adelines International is today the largest women's singing organization in existence, with about 25,000 members.

***Manhattan Chapter charters.*** A Manhattan chapter chartered with 191 members, a record. Geoffrey O'Hara was its first president, and charter members included O'Hara, Sigmund Spaeth, and Harry Armstrong — author of "Sweet Adeline." Robert Moses actually sang and participated, and so occasionally did Mayor LaGuardia and (allegedly) Irving Berlin. (Moses and LaGuardia had instituted the New York City Park contests in about 1923.) The chorus performed at the Park quartet contests, sponsored by the city of New York. This chapter was a large and powerful chapter in the early years, having as many as 300 members in the early '50s. At one time there was even concern that Manhattan might break away from the Society; this never materialized. In later years the chapter declined until in the early '80s it folded. However, it was revived shortly thereafter and its chorus, The Big Apple, earned a medal in 1984 and again several times since.

***Louisville Chapter charters; Lubbock meets every week.*** In 1946 the Louisville chapter chartered with 33 members, but six months later it had 158 members with a chorus of 60 and nine quartets. This chapter, years later, would give us perhaps our greatest chorus, and several top quartets. A new chapter in Lubbock, Texas was so enthusiastic they decided to meet *every week* instead of the usual every other week or semi-monthly practice.

***1946 Convention, Cleveland.*** There were 8000 registrants, and could have been more, had not the main floor viewers been seated at tables. The Quartet winner was the Garden State Quartet of Jersey City, New Jersey, the first east coast quartet champion.

Chairman of Judges Molly Reagan conducted a class on harmony fundamentals. The Board condemned "questionable words or actions" by quartets in public performance.

***John Hanson's Corn Belt Chorus.*** Chapters throughout the Society were now common, and the chapter show, or parade was a familiar and sometimes spectacular event. One of the more successful was the annual show put on every year by the Central Illinois' huge Corn Belt Chorus, directed by John Hanson. It consisted of members from several chapters who learned music separately (often Hanson's arrangements — he was a skillful arranger), then came together for the show. A photo of the group, 325 strong, appeared in the Peoria Star on May 6, 1946, with an accompanying article about the annual show. John's leadership was the inspiration for a young man from Peoria in the chorus named Floyd Connett, who was a barber by profession.

***1947 Convention, Milwaukee.*** Quartet Champions were the Doctors of Harmony, from Elkhart, Indiana. In their singing one hears a well-designed tag, with the bass swiping down an octave to produce to the "divorced bass" position on the last chord. Many old quartets preferred this final voicing.

***"Buzz" Haeger.*** (1925-2007) Attending his first convention in Milwaukee was young Warren Haeger of Chicago, nicknamed "Buzz" from his childhood because of his crew cut hairstyle and his affinity for engines. Buzz was especially impressed with the Hi Lo's, who placed fifth. Buzz had become interested in barbershop in 1945 while in the Marine Corps in San Diego, who played various instruments in a big band. He had become acquainted with barbershopping through his brother Bob ("Moose"), but considered it square. One night he happened to wander into a YMCA where a group of barbershoppers were meeting, hoping to soon charter as a chapter in SPEBSQSA. He began singing baritone and got hooked. After another year in San Diego he was discharged (honorably) from the Marines and came home to Chicago and attended meetings at the Oak Park chapter. In the fall of '46 he enrolled at Purdue University and became a charter member of the Lafayette, Indiana chapter, where he served for some time as director and sang with writer and arranger Skeet Bolles in a quartet called the Canoe Tippers. That same fall Buzz entered his first competition with this quartet in the Indiana-Kentucky District. He was greatly influenced by the early great Chicago quartets like the Four Harmonizers, the Misfits, the Dearborn Four, the Mid States Four, and especially the Elastic Four, which he considered the greatest of all. Frank Thorne was his

mentor. Buzz entered the judging program in the Voice Expression Category, headed by Phil Embury, and became the youngest man to judge the International Contest when in 1949, at the age of 23, he served on the first triple panel. This became a bitter experience when his scores didn't match up well with those of the other two judges and Thorne subsequently told him he was not "of judicial temperament." (Buzz later vindicated himself, certifying in the Harmony Accuracy Category in 1955, and later in the modern Arrangement Category, where he served from 1971 to 1977.) Buzz graduated in 1950 with a degree in mechanical engineering, whereupon he returned to the Chicago area where he became an illustrious figure in that lively barbershop community. Buzz would become one of the Society's greats, as arranger, judge, coach, and quartet man. He was tenor of the 1965 Championship quartet, the Four Renegades.

***The Chicago #1 Chapter.*** This was undoubtedly the greatest hotbed of barbershop activity in the early days. Meetings were held every other week on Friday night, where all of the great Chicago early quartets would frequently be there. The Chordettes were also frequent visitors. The chapter had about 350 members and the meetings have been described as a mob scene. The chapter fielded a chorus of exactly 100 voices, directed by Frank Thorne, and there was a waiting list to get in it. If a singer missed two rehearsals he was replaced. Meetings were sometimes attended by 200 or more. The first hour was a chorus rehearsal, followed by a business meeting and another half hour or so of mass singing. At 10 o'clock the quartet entertainment began, and lasted for hours.

***Voicings in the 40's.*** We must keep in mind that the early top quartets often worked out their own arrangements with a penchant for the exotic. These skilled harmonizers became adept at creating arrangements chock full of barbershop sevenths, often without regard for the implied harmony of the song, or for voice leading. Buzz Haeger, an impressionable youngster in this era, recalled interesting and amusing examples of this sort of thing, including a gymnastic voicing of one of the lines of "Bye Bye Blues".

***"Keep America Singing."*** Phil Embury, who was chairman of the Song Arrangements Committee, sent out a call for an original song on the theme "Keep America Singing." Two responses were received, one composed and arranged by Frank Thorne and one by Bill Diekema of Holland, Michigan, an International Board member, and respected arranger. Embury gave the Thorne composition priority because of his great respect for Thorne, but it was the Diekema composition which caught on. It was performed at the 1947 convention from the grand staircase in the lobby of the Schroeder Hotel by the Milwaukee chapter chorus, and was a tremendous hit. (Reportedly, Diekema had done some politicking to get his song sung.) In the August, 1947 issue of the Harmonizer appeared the song "Keep America Singing," by Bill Diekema. It is now our Society's theme song, with the lyric change "Keep the Whole World Singing," an alteration Diekema did not entirely approve. (Interestingly it was never formally adopted by the Society's board until 1988 at the San Antonio convention.)

***Modern harmony, and other clarifications.*** In 1947 it had been agreed upon by Reagan and others that a song could end on a sixth chord, but not a seventh, since a seventh was a "resolving" chord. But the Society's Judging Committee noticed a tendency toward "modern harmony" chords in the '47 contest. This problem was addressed at the following Mid Winter Convention. An explanation from Contest and Judging Committee Chairman Molly Reagan regarding some rule changes appeared in the February, 1948 Harmonizer. Two of these rules: no "modern harmony," and songs should end on the tonic do-mi-sol chord.

***1948 Convention, Oklahoma City.*** Coached by the great Molly Reagan, the Pittsburghers of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, took the contest. Dean Snyder recalls a cry of "Oh no!" from the crowd when the winners were announced; they felt the Mid-States Four, of Chicago, had won. Dean's memory is confirmed by a recently obtained radio transcription of then finals. Interestingly, the transcription also reveals that the last few bars of the Mid States Four's up tune, "Up And Down The Monen," was sung in "modern harmony," in defiance of the Judging Committee's edict; perhaps this is why they lost.) The Pittsburghers' sound represented a discernable improvement in fidelity, partially due to the cleanness of their arrangements (some by Reagan), which were a cut in quality above those woodshedded by previous champions, but still preserving a basic simplicity typical of the style.

***Second Sweet Adeline Quartet Champions.*** In 1948, the Sweet Adelines Queens of Harmony was the Johnson Sisters, of Chicago Illinois. The presence of few collisions in the parts indicates that arrangements were woodshedded. These four sisters had been singing together since a very early age, and had visited the Chicago #1 Chapter and sung on barbershop shows in the Chicago area.

***Growth of Society.*** In its tenth year (1948) there were 480 chapters in 40 states, Canada, Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam.

***Certification of judges.*** In 1949 an article by Frank Thorne appeared in the Harmonizer in which he discusses the Contest and Judging Committee's plan to begin a program for the certification of judges. This process required candidates to fill out an application, take the Johnson Temperament Analysis test (recommended by Stamford University) to see if has the right judicial temperament, then to judge recorded songs. (Note: Jim Richards says the Johnson test was actually designed to test marriage compatibility; he and Bob Dykstra eliminated it somewhere around 1964, replacing it with the current evaluation form.)

***1949 Convention, Buffalo.*** Our new Champs were the Mid-States Four, from Chicago. All of the members worked for Bell and Howell. In fact, their original name was the Bell and Howell Four. They were known to sing at lunch breaks. This quartet was no doubt the greatest of the forties quartets, and were a popular show quartet for many years. They evoked the vaudeville tradition in their performances and probably entertained better than any previous Society quartet. The Mid States Four are considered to be one of our great champions. The quartet was inducted into the Barbershop Hall of Fame in 2010. Their legacy is somewhat diminished, perhaps, by their juxtaposition with the Buffalo Bills, champions of 1950. They sang into the 1980's, with two of their original members: Mendro and baritone Forrest Haynes. Most songs in their repertoire were performed with accompaniment.

***First chorus directing class.*** At the '49 convention, Frank Thorne had conducted a clinic for chorus directors. His faculty included Peoria's John Hanson.

***Spoof on contest rules.*** A humorous article appeared in the Harmonizer in 1950, satirizing the increasing complicity of contest rule and the continual explanations which kept appearing. The article is by F. Stirling Wilson, then the Society's Historian.

***1950 Convention, Omaha.*** The winners this year would become a nationally known legend in quartet history. They were the Buffalo Bills, from Buffalo, New York.

***Buffalo Bills.*** They were coached by Phil Embury, who wrote many of their arrangements. Their sound was considered by many to be the best ever, at the time. It combined the rich, full voice sound of the old quartet style with the tuned ringing quality of the quartets that would follow — a sort of bridge between the old and the new.

The Buffalo Bills had started singing on September 20, 1947 at the home of baritone Hershel Smith. He and lead Al Shea were members of the Kenmore, New York, chapter, but tenor Vern Reed and bass Bill Spangenberg were not. The four were invited to sing at a Ladies night at the chapter a week thence, which they did. They tried to register as the Town Criers, then as the Four Tune Tellers, but were turned down by Carroll Adams, the Society's executive secretary, because the names were taken. Finally a master of ceremonies at the Buffalo Quarterback Club, advised that they were nameless, introduced them as the Buffalo Bills, a name that stuck. The Bills placed 16th at their first International Contest in Oklahoma City, 1948, and won their district that fall. The next year in their hometown of Buffalo they were sixth. Hershel Smith left the quartet at this point because of travel requirements, and Dick Grapes stepped in as baritone.

Their rendition of "Goodbye Old Dixie, Goodbye-Floatin' Down To Cotton Town" is exemplary of Phil Embury's arranging skills. It contains the famous "die" swipe, which was lengthened 23 years later by the Dealers Choice. Phil did many of the Bills' early arrangements. As champions, they became probably the most active quartet the Society had seen up to that time, travelling to performances at chapter shows across the country. Moreover, the Armed Forces Collaboration Program brought them invitations to sing before military audiences in Germany, France, Austria, Japan, and Korea, among other places. They were often accompanied by Phil Embury. Those who heard the Bills perform often recall the clear, full voice tenor of Vern Reed, perhaps their most defining feature. Over the course of their career they made several records, and like the Mid States Four, they sang many of their numbers with accompaniment. The recording "Buffalo Bills With Banjo", remains popular today and includes their well-known rendition of "My Honey's Lovin' Arms".

Above all this, it happened that the Buffalo Bills advance the cause of barbershopping in a way that no quartet had ever been able to do before, nor has one since. They joined the cast of Meredith Willson's musical, "The Music Man".

***Concluding remarks.*** In the next lesson, we'll talk more about the exciting career of the Buffalo Bills and some other great quartets like the Confederates, the Sun Tones, and the Four Renegades. We'll also trace our Society's history through some of its most exciting times including: its first and only one-family quartet champion, its youngest champion, a possible violation by a Gold Medalist Quartet of the rule that states that a competing quartet must be non-professional, and the advent — and near demise — of that rousing event called the International Chorus Contest.