

THE MELODY MEN

The story about our Retired Men's Association would not be complete without giving proper credits to our singing group, "The Melody Men." They have brought widespread fame to our organization as a result of their "concerts" given in the spring and fall of each year before senior citizen groups and nursing homes in the Greenwich area.

On June 2, 1975, our then President Wilmer "Andy" Anderson approached Wally Pennels, who had an extensive musical background, and asked him to undertake to organize a choral group among our members. Wally, who had heard the members sing at weekly meetings, undertook to hold rehearsals, while Anderson constantly encouraged members to "join in." The first rehearsal took place under Pennels' direction on June 11, 1975. He found that only two of the original seven could read music. The following week, only four attended rehearsal, including Herman Riehl, the original pianist for the group, and himself a professional musician. Anderson kept up his campaign for more members at weekly RMA meetings. Pennels was not too optimistic, mentioning "a lousy room for rehearsals" (theater on the second floor of the Y), "a piano with keys missing," etc. Despite these negatives, attendance at rehearsals improved, and the participants were enjoying it. The momentum grew, and, according to the RMA minutes of July 16, 1975, a contest was held to select a name for the singing group, and the name chosen was "Melody Men." Ironically enough, the member suggesting the name did not step forward to claim his prize and, as a result, his identity is unknown to history.

The first public appearance of the Melody Men took place at the RMA Thanksgiving Luncheon held on November 19, 1975 at the Greenwich Country Club. Pennels, as Director, later acknowledged the help received from "members behind the scenes, especially in the make-up department." He continued, "The heavies were in great form...acting, that is." Greenwich Time, commenting on the same luncheon, reported "The Glee Club provided music with Herman Riehl at the piano followed by audience participation.

Notes on the December 17, 1975 meeting show that Charlie Sweatt and Karl Boger were inducted, and that the latter sang "O, Tannebaum" for the first time, which was to become a traditional part of Christmas concerts in the years to come. A clever parody on "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" took place a week later at the following meeting.

In his report as outgoing President in April, 1976, Wilmer Anderson spoke in glowing terms of the progress of the Melody Men under Pennels' leadership. He termed Pennels as being reluctant to start the project at the outset. Anderson congratulated the group, and paid tribute to their enthusiasm and perserverance "with limited talent available."

The growing recognition of the Melody Men was further illustrated by the Executive Committee's action in appropriating some \$125.00 for the purchase of musical folders for use by the group.

Pennels was succeeded as Director by William "Bill" Van Brunt in 1980. Van Brunt had replaced Herman Riehl as pianist sometime in June 1978. Riehl then became the "warm-up pianist," entertaining audiences before concerts began.

"Bill" Van Brunt made an outstanding contribution as our Director between Spring 1980 and Fall 1985, when his final concerts were held. Van Brunt's strength was not only in his outstanding leadership at the piano, but also in his warm personality and ability to encourage others. He also showed considerable versatility in using special words for novelty and other songs for use by the group.

The opening theme he introduced was "Look For the Silver Lining" and sung as the choir marched on stage in military-like fashion. This stirred the enthusiasm of many an audience and set the tone of what was to follow. Van Brunt's "retirement" took place to allow him to pursue his travels and other interests. Well done, Bill!

As Van Brunt's successor, we were fortunate enough to obtain the services of our present Director, the capable and talented Bob Button. The high esteem in which he is held by our membership, including the Melody Men, was evidenced when he was made an "Honorary Member" of RMA at our September 16, 1987 meeting. However, he is "without the right to vote." Button, a versatile performer in the musical field, is still active in the work force, being an administrator in the cable television field.

The Melody Men have two series of concerts, namely, Spring and Fall, each session covering about six weeks' time, some of which is devoted to rehearsals. They are well-received wherever they appear, wearing blue blazers, grey slacks, and bright red bow-ties, marching on stage in the same military-like fashion.

Speaking of his plans for the Melody Men when he took over, Button said to Greenwich Time...."Our routine will have more movement; kind of choreography...we won't just stand still and sing!" He went on to say, "Within the full chorus numbers, we'll have more solo breaks and will feature the introduction of each member by a different member of the chorus, using a little bit of "Emcee" pattern. Also, there are now comedy bits between musical numbers."

The new theme song for the Melody Men was written by Button and is an adaptation to the "Marine Hymn" and goes -

"From the sandy shores of Greenwich Point
To the hills of back countree,
We will sing the praises of our town,
We're your Men of Melody."

PERSONNEL:

Space limitations prevent us from listing the names of all of our Melody Men through the years since 1975, much as we would like to do so. Among the singers who have had prominent solo parts in concerts are:

Ed Egan.....now in Arizona, in retirement.

Hugh F. Hinckley.....Past President of RMA, still an active member of RMA, but no longer active with the choir.

Karl Boger.....now living in Minnesota, in retirement.

Cliff Kent...Bill Virga...Eldon Rohs...Chuck Hanlon

Currently Chairman of the Steering Committee of the Melody Men is Charlie Sweatt, a post formerly held by Russ Vernet, who was also the Assistant Director. These two members have played a most outstanding role in the activities through the years. Sweatt is also the group Historian and without his complete and meticulous records, this story of the Melody Men would not have been possible.

Other members of the present Steering Committee are: Bob Button, Director; Charles "Chuck" Svihra, Business Manager; Fred Sullaway, Secretary; Walter Humstone, Librarian; and John Galt, Assistant Librarian. Incidentally, Fred Sullaway is the only "Charter" member still singing with the group.

We are indebted to Charles Sweatt for his cooperation in compiling this history. Likewise, we are indebted to Russ Vernet and others for having secured the services of Bob Button as our Director, thus enabling a long and popular organization, yea - a tradition - the Melody Men, to continue and to brighten the lives of their audiences, including us members!

MELODY MEN 1992 SUPPLEMENT

During the Spring and Fall seasons of 1991, our Melody Men gave some twenty-eight concerts before fifteen organizations in Fairfield and nearby Westchester County in New York State. Included in this number were a number of A.A.R.P. (American Association of Retired Persons) Chapters and nursing homes as follows: Homestead Nursing Home (2); Westfield Court (2); Mews (2); King Street Nursing Home (2); Nathaniel Witherell (2); Laurelton Nursing Home (2); Greenwich Woods Nursing Home (2); Ecumenical Council of Churches (Christ Church); St. Catherines Church (2); Greats Senior Center (2); RMA at both YMCA meeting and Annual Dinner (2); Courtland Gardens Residence (2); Courtland Gardens Nursing Home (2); and Osborne Home, Rye, N.Y. (2).

Peter Dixon, General Manager of the Melody Men, advises us that some twenty-one organizations annually request an appearance by the Melody Men. This bears witness to their excellent reputation as songsters. Serving with Dixon on the Steering Committee are Robert (Bob) Button, Director; Lawrence Mills, Production Manager, together with Walter Humstone, Charlie Livingston, Donald Sleath and Chuck Standard. The group put in some 2,735 hours at both rehearsals and concerts in 1991 (Oct. 1, 1990-Sept. 30, 1991). This was a slight increase of 1.5% over the previous year.

Shortly after the Melody Men enter the hall where the concert is taking place, they sing the rousing and catchy tune "We're From the R.M.A." Novelty numbers, many of them performed in dialect, together with props and costumes, always go over well with the audience.

We were all saddened at a recent meeting when President Stevenson announced the death of former RMA charter member, Karl Boger, at a nursing home in Golden Valley, Minn. He had been confined there by reason of failing health. Both his wife, Frieda, and Karl went to Minnesota to make their home with their daughter a few years ago. Their daughter is Sylvia Elrod of Crystal, Minn. Karl excited many an audience with his deep bass voice. His rendition at each Christmas Concert of the melodious "O, Tannenbaum" (Oh, Christmas Tree) was unforgettable, and always "Brought down the house" sung in German. We shall cherish the magic of his voice now stilled at last. His fellow member who joined RMA and sang with him on the Melody Men, Charlie Sweatt, paid a visit to him last summer while in Minnesota on vacation. His wife died Sept. 25, 1989, and Karl's death occurred on April 20, 1992. Appropriately, his Memorial Service was held in our meeting room at the YMCA on May 17th, with a good RMA attendance plus the German Manne-choir of Port Chester, of which he was also a long-term member.

MELODY MEN 1993 SUPPLEMENT

The Melody Men continue their activities under the very able leadership of Director Robert H. Button. Last year they appeared before an estimated 2000 with an average audience of 75 at various retirement homes, senior groups, as well as nursing homes from Rye, NY to Stamford, CT, within a twenty-five mile radius during their spring and fall seasons. They appeared at the following places:

Greenwich Adult Care (2), Homestead Nursing Home (Stamford) 2, Westfield Court (Stamford) 2, Mews (2), King Street Nursing Home (2), Laurelton Nursing Home (2), Greenwich Woods Nursing Home (2), Ecumenical Council of Churches (Christ Church) 2, Eastern Greenwich A.A.R.P. (St. Catherine's Church), Central Greenwich A.A.R.P. (Christ Church) 2, Greats Senior Center (2), Retired Men's Association at Y and Annual Dinner (2), Courtland Gardens Nursing Home (Stamford) 2, Osborne Home (Rye, NY) 2, Stamford Jewish Center, Stamford Senior Men's Association (Stamford). This totalled 33 appearances.

There are twenty-two organizations requesting their appearance each concert season. General Manager for 1992 was Peter M. Dixon while G. Lawrence Mills was Production Manager. Also serving on the Steering Committee was Charles W. Livingston, John P. Galt, Walter Humstone, Donald W. Sleath and Charles E. Standard.

As is customary, the Melody Men gave another outstanding performance at our Annual Dinner at the Stamford Marriott last November. They sang a number of novelty numbers with dynamic vocal eclat along with props and appropriate costumes. Among the soloists were Cliff Kent, Pete Dixon and Larry Mills, who were vociferously applauded by an appreciative audience. The Community Sing-along was most spontaneous featuring, but not limited to, Give My Regards to Broadway, California Here I Come and There's No Business Like Show Business.

They are a distinct credit to our RMA.

THE SUNNYSIDERS

This is our orchestral unit, which is very popular with those who have heard them play. It held its first rehearsal at the Old Greenwich Civic Center on December 9, 1983. Its make-up has remained intact.

Actually, the band was started by John Slaboch, leader and drummer, who had some experience in organizing dance orchestras during his college days at Creighton University, close to a half-century ago. John had long "toyed" with the idea of forming an orchestra as something to do upon retirement. Some years ago, Slaboch heard Joe O'Gorman playing the banjo at an RMA meeting and asked him what his thoughts were on forming an RMA orchestra; they agreed to "think about it." The following meeting, O'Gorman brought Bill Virga over to Slaboch and said, "Here's our trumpet player!" Cliff Kent then joined the unit as its pianist. They held some seven rehearsals and were joined by our current President, Cal Cronan, on his saxophone, on January 6, 1984. Dom Pasquarelli, a non-member and a relative of an RMA member, played with the orchestra for the first time on September 11, 1984 at The Mews.

The band made its first public appearance at RMA's January 18, 1984 meeting. They played a few numbers and were not the featured attraction. Their first public appearance outside RMA was at Greenwich Senior Center on January 23, 1984, when they presented an hour's program.

Presently, the orchestra plays about 20-25 engagements each year. They have played for all three AARP groups in Greenwich; Greenwich Woods; King Street, Laurelton and Witherell Nursing Homes; The Mews, and Eagle Towers (Stamford) senior residences; the Greenwich Senior Center and GREATS; YWCA Friends Together; RMA meetings, Annual Luncheon and Picnic.

We should add that Ben Wickham (piano) and Joe Servidio (guitar) have substituted when Cliff Kent or Joe O'Gorman could not be present.

We are all proud of our Sunnysiders, who have added an "extra dimension" in music by playing at RMA as well as outside community affairs. Our pleasure is only exceeded by the talent and zest they bring to their tasks. Ad Multos Annos, Sunnysiders! John, your idea indeed became a reality!